

*Acts 1:9–11
and the Hyper-Preterism
Debate*

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Introduction

In recent years a challenge to traditional orthodox eschatology has arisen in the form of a doctrine that may be termed “hyper-preterism.” According to proponents of this doctrine, the Christian church has been mistaken in its expectation of a future Second Advent. According to proponents of this doctrine, all New Testament prophecy was fulfilled in the first century. This means that, according to hyper-preterism, the Second Advent, the general resurrection, and the final judgment, among other things, are past events. The emergence of this doctrine has generated a vigorous ongoing debate that shows no sign of slowing.¹

Much of the exegetical attention in the ongoing debate over hyper-preterism has centered on biblical texts such as Matthew 24–25 (The Olivet Discourse) and the Book of Revelation. However, much less attention has been given to the text of Acts 1:9–11.² This is somewhat surprising because traditionally Acts 1:11 has been understood to be a clear and unambiguous promise of the personal, visible, and bodily Second Coming of Jesus Christ to earth. The text is significant to the current debate because in order to assert that the Second Advent occurred in the first century, most hyper-preterists have insisted that the event was either invisible (occurring in the spiritual realm) or visible only to those Christians with the spiritual perception to see.³ Acts 1:9–11, however, seems to describe something more — namely, a bodily ascension from earth and the promise of a corresponding bodily return to earth. Of course, if Acts 1:9–11 promises an objectively visible bodily return of Jesus to this earth, this would create serious problems for the hyper-preterist thesis, since there does not appear to be any evidence that anything of the sort occurred in the first century.⁴ It is for this reason that a much more thorough examination of this text of Scripture is required in light of the current debate.

¹ For a critical response to hyper-preterism, see Keith A. Mathison, ed. *When Shall These Things Be? A Reformed Response to Hyper-Preterism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2004).

² I addressed this text briefly in my chapter of *When Shall These Things Be?* (cf. pp. 184–88), but it was clear that a much more in-depth examination of the text was needed in light of the current debate.

³ Some hyper-preterists, following Edward Stevens, argue that the Second Coming of Christ occurred in the first century and was visible and bodily. As we will see below, however, Stevens does not say that this first century Second Coming was to this earth.

⁴ Edward Stevens believes that there is evidence in the writings of Josephus. This alleged evidence will be discussed in more detail below. I am referring, however, to a lack of the kind of evidence the Bible leads us to expect as a result of the Second Coming — for example, the visible, bodily presence of Christ with his people on a restored earth (e.g. Rev. 21–22), the resurrection of the bodies of his people (e.g. Rom. 8:11; 1

Various Interpretive Positions

The Traditional View

Before proceeding to an examination of Acts 1:9–11 itself, it may prove helpful to outline some of the ways in which this text has been understood throughout history. From the earliest days of the church onward, Acts 1:9–11 has been understood by many orthodox Christians to teach a bodily ascension and bodily return of Christ to earth. The traditional view was taught, for example, by two of the greatest teachers of the early church, John Chrysostom (*ca.* 350 – 407) and Augustine (354 – 430). Chrysostom devotes an entire sermon to this passage, arguing that Christ’s ascension was a bodily ascension and that his return will be in the same manner, namely “with the body.”⁵ Augustine defends the doctrine of the bodily ascension of Christ in a number of places, perhaps most clearly in chapter 6 of his treatise *On Faith and the Creed*, in which he chides those who mock the idea of such an ascension.⁶ Elsewhere he cites Acts 1:11 as proof that Jesus will return in the same human form in which he ascended.⁷

The doctrine of the ascension of Christ is found in the great creeds of the church including the *Apostles’ Creed*, the *Nicene Creed*, and the *Athanasian Creed*. The traditional doctrine of the ascension is also found in the classic Reformed confessions. According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), “On the third day he arose from the dead, with the same body in which he suffered; with which also he ascended into heaven...and shall return” (VIII:4). *The Belgic Confession* (1561) confesses that “our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, bodily and visibly, as he ascended...” (Art. 37). Extended statements of the doctrine are also found in chapter 11 of the *Scots’ Confession* (1560) and chapter 11 of the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1561).

Cor. 15), the removal of the curse and its consequences from the physical creation (e.g. Rom. 8: 19–23; Rev. 21:4).

⁵ John Chrysostom, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Homily II, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. XI, Edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 14.

⁶ Augustine, *On Faith and the Creed*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. III, Edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 326.

⁷ Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament*, Sermon LXXVII, sect. 10, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. VI, Edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 489–90.

The traditional view of Acts 1:9–11 is also found in numerous commentaries. Simon Kistemaker is representative of those who teach this view. Commenting on the promise of the two angels in Acts 1:11, he writes,

The angels' place Jesus' ascension and his return in equilibrium. As he has ascended, so he will come back. Jesus will return physically, in the same glorified body with which he went to heaven.⁸

As Dennis Johnson explains,

With respect to his resurrected body — the body that his friends touched and with which he ate among them (Luke 24:39–43) — Jesus is now in heaven. God's messengers promise that he will return physically, visibly, as he departed (Acts 1:11), but not until the divinely scheduled season of total restoration (3:21).⁹

There have been numerous other commentators and theologians who have taught the traditional view of Acts 1:9–11, but since this is readily acknowledged by all, there is no need to belabor the point

The Rationalist View

With the advent of the Enlightenment, rampant skepticism toward the teaching of Scripture arose throughout the Western world. Critical scholars ransacked Scripture, radically reinterpreting or simply dismissing anything they found that couldn't be squared with the dictates of dogmatic rationalism. Of course, the traditional interpretation of Acts 1:9–11 was quickly dismissed. The interpretation presented by the rationalist H.E.G. Paulus (1761–1851) presents a striking example of what was offered in place of the traditional view.

He [Paulus] believed that Jesus had not died on the cross but had only slipped into a coma. After the crucifixion, not being mortally wounded by the spear thrust, he was moved from the cross and placed in the tomb where aromatic spices soon made him regain conscience [*sic*]. He could leave the grave because an earthquake removed the stone. He then stayed forty days in the company of his disciples. At the end of this period he departed from them and with his last strength walked off into a mist cloud on the mountain, where he finally succumbed to the injuries of his body. The disciples then mistook two casual

⁸ Simon Kistemaker, *Acts*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 57.

⁹ Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 1997), 18–19.

passers-by (who were in fact two accomplices from Jesus' secret followers in Jerusalem) for angelic messengers.¹⁰

Obviously this view is less an interpretation of the text of Acts 1 than it is a complete reconstruction of events based on the preconceived biases of the critic. I list it here simply to show the lengths to which some have gone to deny the miraculous.

The Demythologized View

Some 19th and 20th century critical scholars rejected the rationalist reconstructions of scholars such as Paulus, but their rejection of such views did not mean that they accepted the traditional interpretation of the ascension. The 19th century liberal scholar D.F. Strauss (1808–1874), for example, believed that the miraculous events found in the Gospels and Acts were examples of “myth.” As Zwiep explains, “Strauss claimed that the ascension narratives were never meant to be taken as ad literam reports...”¹¹

Strauss, alternatively, suggested that the ascension was the result of a more or less unconscious mythologizing process. In line with the early community's tendency to make Jesus agree with OT predictions, the ascension was to be regarded as a mythical expression of its belief in Jesus' heavenly exaltation based on the OT Scripture.”¹²

Likewise, Adolf Harnack (1851–1930), one of the chief representatives of theological liberalism, argued that the ascension narrative in Acts 1 was a “legend.”¹³

In the 1940's, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) proposed a development of Strauss' view. In the influential essay, “New Testament and Mythology,” he argued that the truths of the New Testament were couched in mythological terms and proposed a program of “demythologization.”¹⁴ This involved “stripping the Kerygma from its mythological framework” and reinterpreting the language of the New Testament in

¹⁰ Cited in A.W. Zwiep, *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, Vol. LXXXVII (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Adolf Harnack, *The Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Studies, Vol. III. Trans. J.R. Wilkinson (London: Williams & Norgate, 1909), 156–7.

¹⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch, translated by Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961). Bultmann's complete essay is also available on the Internet at http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showbook?item_id=431. This is an important essay that serves as a reminder of the way in which modern man can so easily dismiss the supernatural and the miraculous.

existential terms. According to Bultmann, the ascension of Christ is a legend that has been rendered obsolete by man's scientific and technological progress.¹⁵

Modern Skeptical Views

A skeptical view of Acts 1:9–11 remains commonplace today and can be found in the writings of numerous scholars and authors. Robert W. Funk summarizes the views of the Jesus Seminar in the book *The Acts of Jesus*.¹⁶ According to the Jesus Seminar, the story of the ascension is a “legend.”¹⁷ Funk summarizes the verdict on Acts 1:9–11.

Having laid out his theological program, Luke is ready to have Jesus depart. Jesus does so in [Acts 1] vv. 9–11. Jesus ascends into the sky, while two men in white robes (like the two at the tomb) reassure his followers that Jesus will descend again in the same manner at some unspecified date in the future.¹⁸

The Jesus Seminar, therefore, concluded that, “All of this is the product of Luke's imagination.”¹⁹

John Shelby Spong is another well-known modern skeptic. Spong makes a point of rejecting Luke's account of the ascension in almost every book he has written. In fact, rejection of the ascension story is the eighth of Spong's infamous “12 Theses.” According to this thesis: “The story of the Ascension assumed a three-tiered universe and is therefore not capable of being translated into the concepts of a post-Copernican space age.”²⁰ Elsewhere, he explains this more fully.

The ascension story, as Luke tells it in the Book of Acts, assumes a flat earth covered by a domed ceiling beyond which heaven exists and God dwells. Jesus rises in order to enter the keyhole in the sky to be enthroned at the right hand of God. But in a space age, rising from the earth into the sky does not result in achieving heaven. It might only result in achieving orbit.²¹

¹⁵ Ibid., 1–3.

¹⁶ Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998).

¹⁷ Ibid., 451.

¹⁸ Ibid., 495.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ John Shelby Spong, *Here I Stand* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 454.

²¹ John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 30–31.

He argues, “That may have made sense in terms of the understanding of the cosmos available to people living in the first century, but it makes no sense at all to space-age people.”²² In another popular book, Spong expands on this theme.

Luke writing in the Book of Acts (1:1 ff) gives the only account of the event called the Ascension. It is not an easy narrative to comprehend. The literal details of the Ascension are nonsensical to modern ears: Jesus rising off the ground and disappearing into the sky like a Saturn rocket in slow motion. This account assumed that the world was a universe of three tiers in which heaven was the upper tier. No space-age man or woman can possibly believe this. Literally it did not happen! It could not happen! If a literal ascension is an important part of the Christian story, then the whole Christian enterprise is called into serious question, for such an anti-intellectual religion will not long survive in this technical, scientific age.²³

Obviously, the skepticism harbored by Spong (and many others) towards the traditional doctrine of the ascension is based on the assumption that the doctrine necessitates a view of the universe that has been proven false. I will attempt to explain below why this assumption is false. I will explain why a traditional reading of Acts 1:9–11 does not necessitate belief in a three-storied cosmology or the idea that heaven is somewhere physically above the clouds.

Various Hyper-Preterist Views

It must be noted at the outset that there is no such thing as *the* hyper-preterist interpretation of Acts 1:9–11. Various hyper-preterists have instead proposed a number of different interpretations of this text of Scripture. The suggested interpretations sometimes differ quite dramatically. Because of the wide variety of interpretive views presented by various hyper-preterists, I will at this point simply attempt to state those different views as accurately as possible. In some cases, I will simply quote hyper-preterist statements on the issue in full. I will offer criticism, where necessary, in the exegetical section of the paper.

²² Ibid., 181.

²³ John Shelby Spong, *This Hebrew Lord: A Bishop's Search for the Authentic Jesus*, New Ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 90.

J. Stuart Russell

One of the most influential books in the hyper-preterist movement is J. Stuart Russell's *The Parousia*, published in 1887.²⁴ Many hyper-preterists were persuaded of this doctrine by reading Russell's book. Russell explains his understanding of Acts 1:9–11 as follows:

The last conversation of Jesus with His disciples before His crucifixion was concerning His coming to them again, and the last word left with them at His ascension was the promise of His coming again.

The expression 'in like manner' must not be pressed too far. There are obvious points of difference between the manner of the Ascension and the Parousia. He departed alone, and without visible splendour; He was to return in glory with His angels. The words, however, imply that His coming was to be visible and personal, which would exclude the interpretation which regards it as *providential*, or *spiritual*. The visibility of the Parousia is supported by the uniform teaching of the apostles and the belief of the early Christians: 'Every eye shall see him' (Rev. 1:7).

There is no indication of time in the parting promise, but it is only reasonable to suppose that the disciples would regard it as addressed to them, and that they would cherish the hope of soon seeing Him again, according to His own saying, 'A little while, and ye shall see me.' This belief sent them back to Jerusalem with great joy. Is it credible that they could have felt this elation if they had conceived that His coming would not take place for eighteen centuries? Or can we suppose that their joy rested upon a delusion? There is no conclusion possible but that which holds the belief of the disciples to have been well founded, and the Parousia nigh at hand.²⁵

Max King

Another prominent hyper-preterist author is Max King of Presence Ministries International. King explains his view of Acts 1:9–11 in a footnote in his massive, 784 page book *The Cross and the Parousia*. In a discussion of the term *parousia*, King

²⁴ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983 [1887]).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 147–48. In a recently published book, I made the following comment about Russell's view in a footnote: "...J. Stuart Russell, who discusses at great length many other passages of Scripture, devotes only about half a page to this passage from Acts and fails to offer any compelling evidence that it does not refer to the visible second coming of Christ" (See Keith A. Mathison, "The Eschatological Time Texts of the New Testament," in *When Shall These Things Be? A Reformed Response to Hyper-Preterism* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2004], p. 184, n. 42). My intent was to write "does not refer to the *future* visible second coming of Christ" because Russell clearly does believe that Acts 1:9–11 refers to an A.D. 70 second advent that is "visible" in some sense. Unfortunately, my failure to catch this mistake earlier means that my comment as it stands misrepresents Russell's stated position. I deeply regret this error and hope to correct it in any future printings of the book.

asserts that it means arrival or presence, not return. In the footnote following this assertion, he comments on Acts 1:9–11.

With this understanding of *parousia*, the account of Christ’s ascension in Acts 1:9–11 should be read and interpreted. The central idea here in the coming of Christ is not that of a *return*, much less a *physical return*, but of an arrival of Christ as determined according to the manner of His ascension. The real meaning of “in like manner,” as that which qualifies His arrival, is missed in my opinion, when it is interpreted as a reference to the outward physical circumstances of His ascension. Rather, the focus is on the person – this *same* Jesus. He is the resurrected Jesus who no longer is of the aeon of flesh but who is the Lord and Christ of the new aeon of life. He ascends totally enveloped in the glory and power of God. Hence, this *same* Jesus will come; i.e., He will arrive “apart from sin” (Heb. 9:28), according to the very manner that “ye have seen him go into heaven.”²⁶

Randall Otto

One author whose exegesis of Acts 1:9–11 is cited regularly by hyper-preterists is Randall E. Otto. He outlines his understanding of the text at some length in his book *Coming in the Clouds*.²⁷ It should be noted that Otto’s argument for the invisibility of Christ at His Second Coming rests on his denial that Christ’s resurrection body was a physical body. Otto argues instead that Christ’s resurrection body had a “very evanescent and vaporous quality.”²⁸ After the resurrection, Christ’s “existence was now generally spiritual and invisible in nature.”²⁹ With this in mind, we can better understand Otto’s exegesis of Acts 1:9–11.

After briefly discussing the account of the ascension found in Luke 24:51 and arguing that it emphasizes the suddenness of Christ’s departure, Otto proceeds to a discussion of Acts 1:9–11. Commenting on Acts 1:9, he writes,

Luke here recounts Jesus completing his statement of commission (cf. Luke 24:48–49), and “while they were looking on” or “before their eyes” (*blepontōn*), Jesus was lifted up. The verb *blepontōn* need not require us to understand the disciples’ actually looking at Jesus as the ascension occurs; indeed, should Luke have intended to convey that meaning, he most certainly could have added “at him” (*epi auton*). In fact, according to the standard Greek lexicon, *blepō* is used

²⁶ Max R. King, *The Cross and the Parousia* (Warren, OH: Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1987), 495, n. 92.

²⁷ Randall E. Otto, *Coming in the Clouds: An Evangelical Case for the Invisibility of Christ at His Second Coming* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

here abstractly; there is no object at which the disciples can be said to be looking.³⁰

Otto continues, explaining his understanding of the actual ascension itself.

Before the eyes of the disciples or in their sight, then, Jesus was “lifted up.” The word translated “lifted up” is *eperthē* (aorist passive form of *epairō*); while in its active form this word does describe the physical action of lifting up an object, such as one’s hands in prayer (1 Tim 2:8) or a staff (Exod 10:13), in its passive form its “literal” meaning has a figurative twist to it, since it does not have to do with an active *physical* lifting up but with a lifting up of someone in stature or dignity.³¹

After mentioning that the BAGD Greek Lexicon lists 1 Clement 45:8 as another instance of the passive use of *epairō*, he adds, “As we can plainly here see, the only other similar use of this word does *not* denote a literal and physical elevation of the person, but rather describes in figurative terms the elevation of the person in honor and dignity, i.e., exaltation.”³² According to Otto, “we should be careful not to infuse additional imagery of an active, physical rising into that simple testimony of the exaltation of Jesus by means of his final departure and vanishing from the disciples.”³³

Continuing his comments on Acts 1:9, Otto explains, “As with Elijah and the tradition of Moses, while the disciples were looking on, a cloud suddenly came down and completely enveloped their master, removing him from their sight.”³⁴

To the eye of faith, Jesus is exalted (“lifted up”) *because* the cloud envelops him and carries his hidden person aloft to the special place he merits with the Father. The cloud, of course, symbolizes the Divine Glory of God which, as always, must be hidden from men (even of faith), due to their incapacity to see it in its unveiled splendor.³⁵

³⁰ Ibid., 253.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. The second English edition of Walter Bauer’s Greek lexicon is normally abbreviated BAGD for the first letters of the last names of its author and editors. See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Second Edition, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, revised by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979). Any reference in this paper to “BAGD” is a reference to the Second Edition of the Bauer lexicon.

³³ Ibid., 255.

³⁴ Ibid., 256. It should, of course, be observed that the text nowhere says that the cloud “came down,” but more on this below.

³⁵ Ibid.

Among other things, the cloud “signals by *its physical* and *visible* rise into the heavens the *spiritual* and *invisible* nature of the exaltation of the one hidden by and enveloped within the cloud.”³⁶

In his comments on Acts 1:11, it becomes clear how Otto’s understanding of the ascension affects his understanding of the Second Advent.

While this verse [Acts 1:11] is generally cited to prove that the glorified Jesus will himself be *personally* visible at his second coming, it is in fact the case that the glorified Jesus cannot be seen by any man because his glorified person is veiled, hidden, and enveloped within the cloud of God’s presence.... Just as the disciples had not seen Christ going up to heaven, but rather the cloud which veiled him and his Divine Glory, so *in the same manner*, i.e., hidden within the cloud, he would return. It cannot be stated too strongly: the glorified Jesus himself will *not* be visible in his second coming for he was not visible in his ascension, but rather hidden.³⁷

Because Otto’s exegesis is cited by a number of other hyper-preterist authors, I will examine it in more detail below.

Edward E. Stevens

One of the most prolific hyper-preterist authors is Edward E. Stevens, president of the International Preterist Association. For Stevens, Acts 1:9–11 is best explained in terms of the imagery found in the Day of Atonement ritual. The ascension, according to Stevens, should be understood as part of Christ’s High Priestly work that fulfills the Day of Atonement typology.

The earthly temple was patterned after the heavenly one. The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) in the earthly temple merely foreshadowed the work that Christ our true High Priest would accomplish in the “true” heavenly temple (Heb. 9:23–28). Edersheim does a great job of explaining the typology in his book on *The Temple*. He shows how the High Priest ascends the Temple mount and ascends into the Temple itself and even further on up into the Holy of Holies itself. It is “ascension” language. Before the High Priest can enter the Holy of Holies to perform the blood spattering on the Mercy Seat, he has to first fill the temple with the cloud of incense. Once the cloud of smoke fills the temple (symbolizing the glory cloud Presence of God) he brings the blood of the bull and the goat into the Holy of Holies. So, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what the

³⁶ Ibid., 257.

³⁷ Ibid., 257–58. The effect that Otto’s presuppositions have upon his exegesis are perhaps most clearly evident here. Note, for example, the difference between what the two men in white say (“you saw him go into heaven”) and what Otto says (“the disciples had not seen Christ going up to heaven”).

ascension in Acts 1 is all about. Christ our true High Priest ascended into the heavenly Holy of Holies to present His sacrificial blood on the Heavenly Mercy Seat to make final atonement for us. Then He (like the earthly High Priest) would come back out of the Holy of Holies (cf. Heb. 9–10, esp. 9:26–28, and 10:37) to announce to His anxiously waiting saints that atonement had been fully and finally accomplished. Notice in the Heb. 10:37 text when this “descent” back out of the Temple was supposed to occur (“in a VERY little while”).³⁸ He left in clouds of glory, and He returned in the same manner in clouds of glory (cf. Acts 1:11).³⁹

Stevens explains this view further.

Acts 1:11 fits into the Preterist schema very neatly and consistently. It explains the Yom Kippur typology and quilts together many heretofore disjointed remnants of soteriology and eschatology into one seamless garment. Christ returned in AD 70 “in the same manner” in which He left. He ascended as High Priest into the glory cloud of the Father’s Presence, and He descended back out of that glory cloud as High Priest to announce to His waiting saints (in the outer courts of the temple) that His blood had been accepted and that reconciliation was complete and the Holy of Holies was open for them to dwell in. Christ’s descent (the Parousia) is the exact point at which soteriology and eschatology and Christology all coincide and mutually reinforce each other. Eschatology is the final events of soteriology which reveal and unveil Who Christ is and what He has done. The Parousia at AD 70 puts the focus on Christ, whom the Jews had rejected, and reassures Christians that He has redeemed us from Sheol. Acts 1:11 does not talk about some unrelated “ascension” of Christ into heaven. And the return it predicts cannot be some other Parousia than the one the apostles had been taught to expect within their lifetime. Acts 1:11 fits the Yom Kippur typology like a hand-tailored glove. No futurist interpretation of Acts 1:11 does justice to this glory-cloud Theophany and Yom Kippur “ascend/descend” typology that is prominently featured in this passage.⁴⁰

³⁸ It is ironic that Stevens quotes Hebrews 10:37 here in an attempt to prove that the Second Advent of Christ was to occur very soon after the writing of Hebrews. Hebrews 10:37 is a quotation of Haggai 2:7, which was written around 520 years before Christ. If Haggai 2:7 is a prophecy fulfilled in Christ’s first advent, his “little while” was at least 520 years. The author of Hebrews quotes the prophecy to refer to something still in the future at the time Hebrews was written, so Haggai’s “little while” appears to be an even longer period of time than that. If Haggai’s prophecy had an initial fulfillment in his own time as well as a later fulfillment in the time of Christ, then the fact that he used such language (“little while”) supports the possibility of multiple fulfillments of prophecies.

³⁹ Edward E. Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife* (Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 1999), 44. As an aside, it should also be noted that Stevens’ outline of his view seems to rely to some extent on Alfred Edersheim’s nineteenth century work entitled *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994). Edersheim’s book must be used with care, however, for much of it is his own reconstruction based not upon the text of Scripture alone, but also upon various uninspired Jewish traditions such as the Mishnah and the work of Maimonides (cf. *The Temple*, pp. ix–x). However, even Edersheim does not emphasize “ascension” in his treatment of the Day of Atonement ritual (cf. *The Temple*, pp. 240–63).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45–46.

According to Stevens, then, Jesus' Second Coming in AD 70 was the moment when "He descended back out of that glory cloud as High Priest to announce to His waiting saints (in the outer courts of the temple) that His blood had been accepted..." Some of the righteous Old Testament dead had "ascended with Christ (Eph. 4:8, 9) to the outer courts of the heavenly temple (Rev. 6:9–11) to await Jesus' (the High Priest's) return back out of the Holy of Holies to announce that atonement had been completed (Heb. 9:11–28)."⁴¹

Stevens has offered some clarification of his interpretation of Acts 1:9–11 in light of his recent adoption of Russell's literal first century rapture theory.⁴² In the first place, he emphasizes that both the ascension and the promised coming of Christ were theophanies.

In Hebrews 9, it states very clearly that Christ our High Priest would completely fulfill the Yom Kippur typology not only by His ascension into the true Heavenly Holy of Holies (once for all) for us, but that He would also descend back out of the Holy of Holies part of heaven and "appear a second time" in the air (i.e., the "air" above the earth, where the clouds are and where the angels appeared, and where God's theophanies always appeared, when the clouds were rolled back like a scroll to open a window into the spiritual realm so that those to whom God wished to reveal Himself would be able to see this theophany). The Acts 1 ascension was a theophany with angels present, and Christ's return would be a theophany just like it. Notice what the angels actually said in Acts 1:11, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will COME in just the same way as you have watched Him GO into heaven." They did NOT say, "Jesus will come back down to earth and plant his feet on terra firma again." Instead, they say that Christ's descent FROM heaven will be a theophany "just like" His ascent TO heaven was. The COMING BACK OUT of heaven was "just like" his GOING INTO heaven (a "cloud coming" theophany). He left visibly *and bodily* with angels and clouds, and He returned visibly *and bodily* with angels and clouds. It does not say that He would touch down to the ground again. Premillennialists and other futurists have tried to assert that idea, but *I believe* it is a misinterpretation of the text. *A touch-down to earth again is not typologically suggested by the Yom Kippur imagery. Even Amillennialist Futurists reject the idea of Christ setting foot back on planet earth again. So it is not extraordinary for a futurist or a preterist to take that position.*⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid., 47.

⁴² In a personal email from Ed Stevens dated Feb. 24, 2004. Stevens' argument for a literal first century rapture is found in his book *Expectations Demand a First Century Rapture*, rev. ed. (Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 2003).

⁴³ Ed Stevens, Personal email to me dated Feb. 24, 2004. Because Edward Stevens' position on Acts 1:9–11 involves a broad range of issues, I asked him to look at my statement of his position in order to make sure that there was no misrepresentation. In a personal email dated April 7, 2004, Stevens indicated some of the places where he believed my presentation of his view could be clarified. In this particular quote, he

Stevens continues by explaining more fully what he means when he says that Christ descended back out of the Holy of Holies to appear “in the air.”

The spiritual realm exists in the “air” all around us. It is that same spiritual realm where the angels are, and where Satan and his demons did their work. That is why Satan was called the “Prince of the Power of the Air.” That spiritual realm is not normally visible to people on earth. However, on special redemptive occasions, when God wishes to intervene visibly in the affairs of men, He will make His presence known by unveiling the spiritual realm (rolling the clouds back like a scroll) and opening a window into that realm so that mortals on earth can see what is going on there in the immortal realm. It is one of those “theophany” type of occasions when angels appear to men and reveal new prophecy or explain/announce the fulfillment of prophecy. In my QUESTIONS book,⁴⁴ when I talked about Christ descending or “coming back” out of heaven, I was talking about His descent from the Holy of Holies part of the spiritual realm to the outer courts part of the spiritual realm. At His *visible and bodily* descent Jesus did not touch down on the physical ground. Instead, He remained in the same spiritual realm “in the air” where the angels were visible on theophany occasions.... The “where” of Jesus’ return was the “air.” 1 Thess. 4:15–17 is the clearest text on that. The “air” as Paul uses it in these second coming texts is not talking about the air we breathe or the mere sky above the earth, but rather the open space between earth and heaven where the normally unseen angels and God make their visible theophanic appearance on special redemptive occasions. Jesus did not leave the spiritual realm to make His reappearance in the “air.” *He became visible ‘in the air’ above Palestine with His angelic armies, while remaining in the spiritual realm, just like angels have done many times in the past. Becoming visible in the sky above Palestine did not require Him to leave the spiritual realm.* He did “descend” from the Holy of Holies part of that spiritual realm into the “air,” but He did not leave the spiritual realm in order to make that reappearance in the “air.” He ascended in the Glory Cloud of that same “air,” and He returned in that same Glory Cloud in that same “air.” It was an ascent in the Glory Cloud into the “air” originally, and was a descent in the same Glory Cloud into the same “air” again at AD 70. Both the going away and the return were “cloud comings” (theophanies) accompanied by angels. He left the same way He was to return (in clouds with the angels) to appear to his anxiously waiting disciples (“How long, O Lord?” and “O, our Lord, come!”). They expected that return before all of them in that generation died. Some of them were promised to still be alive and remain until His return (Matt. 16:27-28 and John 21:22ff). Since the ascension was a literal event, and was visible (to only His disciples evidently), the implication is that His disciples (some of whom lived and remained until AD 70) would also get to see and experience His return. This is exactly what the literal rapture view of Preterism is all about. ...the living and remaining disciples

suggested the addition of some words and sentences. The words that were added to his previous (02/24/04) statement in order to clarify it are italicized.

⁴⁴ Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife*.

literally saw Christ return and were caught up to be with Him in the same heavenly realm that they had seen Him go into at the ascension.⁴⁵

According to Stevens, “The Acts 1:11 reference to the return of Christ is easy to apply to AD 70 when we realize it is speaking of the reverse of the visible *ascent* of Christ in Theophany form. His *descent* would follow the same Theophany pattern as His *ascent*, meaning that it would be visible like His departure.”⁴⁶

Stevens concludes by explaining how it is possible, in his view, to argue that Christ visibly returned in the first century. He points out that some commentators have said that Revelation 1:7 (which mentions a coming with the clouds that every eye will see) was fulfilled in A.D. 70. Stevens then explains, “Since most expositors connect Rev. 1:7 with Acts 1:11, it seems reasonable to assign both Rev. 1:7 and Acts 1:11 to the visible Theophany that was seen by the Jewish people just before the war in AD 66.”⁴⁷ Stevens cites a passage in Josephus that says the Jews saw chariots and troops of soldiers in the clouds.⁴⁸ He concludes that if the armies Josephus says were literally seen in the clouds at AD 66 were the fulfillment of Revelation 1:7, then these armies were also the fulfillment of Acts 1:11.⁴⁹ Because of the detailed nature of Stevens’ view, particular attention will be paid to it in the exegetical section below.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Stevens, Personal email to me dated Feb. 24, 2004. Words and sentences added to the quote per Stevens’ April 7, 2004 request are italicized.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. The passage is found in Josephus, *Wars*, Bk. 6, Ch. 5, Sect. 3.

⁴⁹ In his Foreword to the new edition of James Stuart Russell’s *The Parousia* (Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 2003), Stevens cites Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr. several times. On page xi, he cites comments made by Sproul at the 1999 Ligonier Ministries national conference. On page xii, Stevens writes, “If the angelic armies literally seen in the clouds at AD 66 were the fulfillment of ‘every eye shall see Him’ (Rev. 1:7) as Sproul has allowed as a possibility, then it was also the fulfillment of Acts 1:11!” I do not believe statements such as this accurately reflect Sproul’s views. In the comments from Sproul’s seminar cited by Stevens, Sproul indicates that the judgment of God came upon Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and that the New Testament prophecies of this judgment used the same kind of metaphorical language that the Old Testament prophets used to describe other divine judgments. But then Sproul says, concerning this judgment, “Was Jesus visible? Did ‘every eye see him’ [Rev. 1:7] and all of that? No.”

⁵⁰ The exegetical section of the paper consists of subsections dealing with the text of Acts 1:9–11 itself as well as a summary of the problems with the various hyper-preterist interpretations. Since most of Stevens’ comments have to do with broader contextual issues rather than specifics of the text of Acts 1:9–11, the bulk of the response to his view will be found in the subsection dealing with a summary of problems in the various hyper-preterist views.

John Noē

John Noē is a popular hyper-preterist author and speaker and is the founder of the Prophecy Reformation Institute. He has written a number of books related to the subject of hyper-preterism. His understanding of Acts 1:11 is explained in his recent dissertation as follows:

Acts 1:11 – “‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way (like manner) you have seen him go into heaven.’”

Sproul writes that “the return of Christ will be as visible as His departure. This text [Acts 1:9-11] seems to preclude any possibility of an invisible return of Christ.” Or does it? The operative phrase here is “in the same way” or “in like manner.”

In one application, and if this verse does refer to Christ’s parousia, it must be pointed out that Christ’s disciples *did not* see Him ascend into heaven because “a cloud hid him from their sight” (Acts 1:9). Therefore, his return “in the same way” or “in like manner” would also be hidden from sight. During the destruction of Jerusalem mammoth clouds of smoke from the burning debris rose high into the sky for days.

Likewise, how much “like mannered” does his return to earth need to be? Many have been taught that this phrase means in an identical manner—i.e., identical in every detail, except in reverse order. So, since He ascended in a visible resurrected body, He must come back in that same form, physically and visibly. Then must He also come back to that exact location on the Mount of Olives? How far do we press this? Back then only a small group saw Him ascend. Does this mean that only a small group or only those same people will see Him return versus every person on earth at that time? Traditional explanations contain numerous problems. Additionally, consider this. If “in like manner” means “in exactly the same way” then:

- How does Jesus come from heaven riding on a white horse (Rev. 19:11)?
- How does He come “with ten thousand of His saints” (Jude 14)?
- How does He come “as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west” (Matt. 24:27)?
- How does He come “with a loud command [shout] . . . and with the trumpet call of God” (1 Thess. 4:16)?
- How does He come “in blazing fire with his powerful angels” (2 Thess. 1:7)?

Thankfully, there is another explanation and application for this verse. It revolves around the meaning of the Greek word *erchomai* that is translated “will come back.” This word actually means “comes or goes.” In the Acts 1:11 account, we

see a going. Moreover, the two angels (“two men dressed in white” [vs. 10]) did not say Jesus would come in like “body,” or in the same “body,” or to the same “place,” or to only those who witnessed his ascension. The emphasis is on the *manner* of his coming. This phrase does not limit Jesus to coming back in only a physical/visible mode. It means *how* He comes. That is: in many, if not most, of his Old and New Testament appearances Jesus came out of the invisible spirit realm, manifested Himself in the visible physical realm, and then went back into the invisible spirit realm. That has been the means and manner of many of his comings and goings. He moves out of one dimension, into another, and back again. By the way, angels have that same capability (2 Kgs. 6:17). His form, the place, and the recipients have varied. *Erchomai*—comes and goes—is the general, overall manner in which all his many visible comings have occurred. But there were and are other comings that are not visible.⁵¹

Timothy James

In his book, *The Messiah’s Return*, the hyper-preterist author Timothy James includes a brief explanation of his understanding of Acts 1:9–11.

There are only two main verses that have loosely been used to assume a physical return of Christ by the Greek-dominated church. The first is Acts 1:9–11 (the Ascension), “he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight,” after this the two angels reassured the disciples saying, “this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven.” (emphasis mine, tj) The emphasis here is not on the transfigured form, but on the manner in which he ascended and would return, “in a cloud.” This event was a reaffirmation of Jesus’ being the apocalyptic “Son of Man” spoken of in Daniel and the Gospels. That he, “the Son of Man,” came with the clouds of heaven (Daniel 7:13), is later emphatically stated to be fulfilled in His return, in numerous places (Matt. 16:27f; 24:30; Mark 13:26; and Luke 21:27).⁵²

Others

In addition to the authors cited above, there are a large number of lesser known hyper-preterist authors who have offered their own suggestions regarding the meaning of Acts 1:9–11.⁵³ Some offer suggestions differing from those I have already listed. Others simply endorse one of these more prominent authors. Kenneth J. Davies, for example, simply endorses Randall Otto’s position in his short essay entitled “How was Acts 1:11

⁵¹ John Noë, “The Superiority of Preterism: An Evaluation of the Four Major Evangelical Views of the Return of Christ” (Ph.D. diss. Trinity Theological Seminary, 2003), 363 – 364. I would like to thank Dr. Noë for sending me this excerpt from his dissertation.

⁵² Timothy James, *The Messiah’s Return: Delayed?, Fulfilled?, or Double-Fulfillment?* Rev. ed. (Bradford, PA: Kingdom Publications, 1991), 33. Emphasis in original.

⁵³ Most of these comments are only available on various hyper-preterist web sites.

Fulfilled in AD 70?”⁵⁴ William H. Bell, Jr. presents his view in an essay entitled “The Parousia and Acts 1:11.”⁵⁵ Unfortunately, Bell does not offer any exegesis of Acts 1:9–11. The argument presented in the essay boils down to this: Other biblical references to the Parousia of Christ indicate that it would definitely occur within the first century. Acts 1:11 refers to the same event to which these other passages refer. Therefore, the coming of Christ predicted in Acts 1:11 *must* have been fulfilled in the first century as well. Most of the paper is devoted to a discussion of texts other than Acts 1:9–11.

One of the more unique and ingenious hyper-preterist explanations of the meaning of Acts 1:9–11 is found in an unsigned essay entitled “Do Angels Ask Stupid Questions?”⁵⁶ In this essay, the author argues that if the angels in Acts 1:11 are saying that Jesus is going to return in the same manner that he ascended, then their question was “stupid” because that would be a very good reason for the apostles to be looking into the sky. He argues that there are only two good explanations for their question. The first good explanation is that they meant he would return, but not soon. The author discounts this possibility, saying that if the angels meant this they would have made some mention of a delay. The second possibility he suggests is that our translations of the word *eleusetai* (“He will come”) are incorrect. He argues that the verb “means neither come (to here) nor go (to there), but rather ‘proceed.’” Based on this definition, he claims that the angels’ question is no longer “stupid.”

Now the question asked by the angels has meaning. In the same way that the women should not seek the living among the dead because “He is risen,” the disciples should not look for Him in the earthly realm because “This Jesus... thus will *proceed* in the way you beheld Him going, *into heaven*.” In other words, He has ascended, and proceeds to His Father in heaven.⁵⁷

According to this author, Acts 1:9–11 does not refer to the departure and future return of Jesus. Instead it refers to “the departure and *destination* of Jesus...”⁵⁸

Other hyper-preterist authors have written on the subject of Acts 1:9–11, but most seem to have adopted one or another of the interpretations I have already described

⁵⁴ See http://www.kendavies.addr.com/articles/how_was.htm.

⁵⁵ See http://www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/bell-william_p_02.html

⁵⁶ See <http://www.geocities.com/newearthcs/studies/Ascension.html>

⁵⁷ “Do Angels Ask Stupid Questions?” There are no page numbers in the web article.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

above.⁵⁹ Others have suggested a slight modification to one of the more prominent interpretations or some combination of interpretations, but to my knowledge I have not neglected to mention any interpretation of Acts 1:9–11 held by any prominent hyper-preterists.

Examination of the Text

Introductory Questions

The text of Acts 1:9–11 and the book in which it is found do not exist in a vacuum. In order to accurately understand this passage of Scripture, it is necessary to answer some basic preliminary questions. Who wrote the book of Acts, and when did he write it? To whom did he write it and why? What type (genre) of literature is the completed work?

Traditionally, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts has been believed to be Luke, a companion of Paul during part of his ministry. Although critical scholars regularly challenge this traditional view today, I see no compelling reason to reject it and much to support it.⁶⁰ We have very little definite personal information about Luke himself. However, it is significant to know that the author of Acts, as a companion of Paul, would have had direct access to eyewitnesses of the events he describes. In fact, Luke explicitly mentions his access to eyewitness accounts in the prologue that serves to introduce his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). For his knowledge of the events described in Acts 1–15, Luke would have had access to men such as Paul, Philip, Mark, Peter, and Barnabas among others. For the events described in Acts 16–28, Luke would have had access to Paul as well as first-hand personal knowledge.⁶¹

The original recipient of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts is said to be Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1), about whom virtually nothing certain is known. He may have been Luke's patron, but until more evidence is forthcoming, all such suggestions are merely speculation. New Testament scholars have suggested dates for

⁵⁹ A collection of such comments can be found at http://www.preteristarchive.com/StudyArchive/a/acts_1-11_in-like-manner.html

⁶⁰ For an examination of the arguments for and against Lucan authorship, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, Rev. ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 113–25; and D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 185–90.

⁶¹ Even more significantly, Luke's writing was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

the writing of Acts that range from A.D. 62 until well into the middle of the second century. The strongest arguments appear to support a date somewhere between A.D. 62 and A.D. 64.⁶²

Luke's prologue to his Gospel helps us identify his basic purpose in writing both the Gospel itself and the Book of Acts. In this prologue, Luke writes,

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1–4, ESV).⁶³

There are a couple of important things to observe in this passage. First, Luke's purpose is to write an orderly account of the things that happened. He is aware of other written accounts of these things, and he says that he is among those to whom accounts of these things have been delivered by eyewitnesses. In other words, Luke's primary purpose in writing was historical. Second, Luke is providing Theophilus with this historical account in order that he may have certainty concerning the things he has been taught (1:4). In other words, Luke is not writing history for history's sake. He is providing Theophilus with a certain historical foundation for his Christian faith. Luke intended his Gospel and the Book of Acts to accurately present the things that actually happened according to eyewitnesses. Like Peter, Luke refused to "follow cleverly devised myths" (2 Pet. 1:16). The Book of Acts, therefore, is best described as a historical book.⁶⁴

The Text

We now come to the key question in the debate: "What saith the Scripture?" As we have seen, hyper-preterists have suggested a number of objections to the traditional interpretation of this text and have offered a number of potential alternative

⁶² For a survey of the evidence for various dates, see D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 190–94.

⁶³ Unless otherwise noted, all English Scripture citations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

⁶⁴ The historicity of the Book of Acts is, of course, vigorously denied by skeptical scholars. For a thorough examination of the historicity of Acts, see Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, 49 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989).

interpretations in its place. Each of these objections and alternative interpretations will be discussed as we proceed with a positive exegesis of the text.

The Context

The account of the ascension in Acts 1:9–11 occurs at the very beginning of the Book of Acts. It is important, therefore, to understand it in the broader context of the narrative of Luke-Acts. How does this text fit into the broader context? Why is it found at this point in the narrative? What is Luke's point? At the most basic level, Luke's point is to write an accurate account of what happened at Jesus' final appearance to his apostles after the resurrection. The ascension narrative in Acts 1 is presented as a straightforward historical narrative. There is a repeated emphasis in verses 9–11 on the fact that there were eyewitnesses to the event (cf. 1 John 1:1). The ascension itself is treated in the immediate context as the last event of Jesus' earthly ministry (Acts 1:22). As Bruce Metzger explains, "The special contribution which Luke makes is to suggest that the ascension was an event as real and objective as the other appearances of the risen Lord."⁶⁵

Luke does not provide this account, however, simply to satisfy our historical curiosity. The ascension account also forms an important part of Luke's overall narrative purpose. In the context of Luke's broader narrative (Luke-Acts), this historical account of the ascension serves as a transition point, a "hinge," as it were, between the Gospels and the church, between Jesus and the Spirit. It is interesting to observe, for example, the frequency of the term *pneuma* ("spirit") in the Gospels in comparison to its frequency in Acts. In Matthew, the word *pneuma* occurs 19 times; in Mark, 23 times; in Luke, 36 times; in John, 24 times. In Acts, however, the word is used 70 times. Jesus explained to his disciples, "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). It makes perfect sense, therefore, for Luke to introduce the era of the Spirit with the account of Jesus' departure. According to Jesus' own words, his departure (Acts 1) is a necessary condition for Pentecost (Acts 2).

⁶⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, "The Ascension of Jesus Christ," in *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 82.

Luke's account of the ascension also provides a turning point in the apostles' understanding of the kingdom of God. In Acts 1:3, Luke tells us that after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to the apostles over a period of forty days, speaking to them about the kingdom of God. At his last appearance, immediately before the ascension, the apostles ask Jesus a question about the kingdom of God: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). After Jesus ascension, whatever confusion may have remained in the apostles' minds regarding the kingdom had been completely dispelled. From the ascension onward, they are found confidently proclaiming the kingdom of God (Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). They are found proclaiming that Christ is now king (Acts 17:7; cf. 2:36). The same proclamation is found in the books these apostles wrote after the ascension (cf. Col. 1:13; Heb. 12:28; Rev. 1:6, 9). The book of Acts begins (1:3) and ends (28:31) on the subject of the kingdom, and the ascension of Christ, as we will see, is what cemented the apostles' understanding of this key doctrine.

Acts 1:1–8

In Acts 1:1–8, Luke introduces the events that lead up to the account of the ascension itself in verses 9–11. Verses 1–5 form a prologue that ties the Book of Acts to the Gospel of Luke and introduces the events to follow.

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (1:1–5).

Luke here describes his Gospel as "the first book," with the implication that Acts is a "second" book. He informs his readers that Jesus appeared to the apostles over a period of forty days after his death and resurrection. He offered many proofs that he was truly alive (cf. Luke 24:39–43), and he spoke to them about the kingdom. Jesus also

commanded the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father — the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1:4–5; cf. Luke 24:49).

Following this brief prologue, Acts 1:6–8 provides the immediate context for the ascension account.

So when they had come together. They asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

The apostles have gathered together with Jesus on the Mount of Olives (cf. Acts 1:12) just east of Jerusalem. The apostles ask him a question about the kingdom, specifically whether he would “at this time” restore it to Israel. Jesus does not answer either yes or no. Instead, he tells the apostles that it is not for them to know “times or seasons.”⁶⁶ Jesus then reminds the apostles of the promise of the Father they are to await in Jerusalem (cf. 1:5). He tells them they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. He then gives the apostles their last commission, telling them they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

The apostles’ question indicates that they continued to conceive of the kingdom in too limited and exclusive a sense.⁶⁷ They continued to think only in terms of the nation of Israel. Jesus’ answer to their question pointed to a much different concept of the kingdom. The apostles were to be his witnesses not only in Jerusalem and Judea, but also in Samaria and to the very ends of the earth. Israel had been commissioned with this task under the Old Covenant (cf. Isa. 43:10; 44:8; 49:6), but she failed. The task was now given to the new Israel.⁶⁸ Many commentators believe this commission acts as a kind of key to the structure of Acts with the apostles preaching in Jerusalem in Acts 1–7, in all Judea and Samaria in 8:1–11:18, and to the ends of the earth in 11:19–28.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Greek, χρόνους ἢ καιροῦς (chronous ē kairous).

⁶⁷ Cf., Kistemaker, *Acts*, 52. The question also seems to indicate a certain lack of appreciation for the spiritual aspect of the kingdom or the way in which the coming of the kingdom was connected with the outpouring of the Spirit.

⁶⁸ For more on the nature of the “new Israel,” see David E. Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

⁶⁹ Cf., F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 36–37.

Acts 1:9

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

The entire account of the ascension is told very succinctly in three verses. Luke connects Acts 1:9 to the previous text with the conjunction *kai* (“and”) and two participles: the aorist participle *eipōn* (“after he said,” or “when he had said”) and the present participle *blepontōn* (“while they were looking,” or “as they were looking”). As C.K. Barrett observes,

The contrast between aorist and present participles is intentional and significant. Jesus has now said all that he has to say to his disciples. The promise of the Spirit and the commission to act as witnesses complete his work on earth. The disciples however are still looking at him, and are thus able to vouch for his ascent into heaven.⁷⁰

As we noted above, Randall Otto argues that Luke’s use of a form of the verb *blepō* does not require us to assert that the disciples were actually looking at Jesus. He argues that had Luke intended this meaning, he certainly would have mentioned Christ as the direct object. He then adds, “according to the standard Greek lexicon, *blepō* is used here abstractly; there is no object at which the disciples can be said to be looking.”

There are several problems with Otto’s line of reasoning. First, he is ignoring the immediate context. According to the context, the entire ascension event, including the lifting up of Jesus, is what the disciples saw in verse 9. And if it is still claimed that the disciples were not looking at Jesus himself, all we have to do is observe the content of verse 11, which does provide an explicit direct object, saying: “you saw him (*auton*) go.”⁷¹ Second, Otto’s claim about the definition of *blepō* in the standard Greek lexicon is incorrect. The second edition of the Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich Greek-English lexicon (the lexicon cited by Otto) does not say that *blepō* is used “abstractly” in Acts 1:9. The meaning of the abbreviation “abs.” is provided in the introductory pages of the lexicon. According to the editors, it means “absolute,” not “abstract.”⁷²

⁷⁰ C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1, The International Critical Commentary, eds. J.A. Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield, and G.N. Stanton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 81.

⁷¹ Greek, ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον (*etheasasthe auton poreuomenon*).

⁷² See BAGD, xxxix.

For those, such as Otto, who want to restrict the meaning of *blepō* to “spiritual perception,” the text of Acts 1:9–11 provides no support. While it can be used in that sense, “*blepō* in general simply refers to the capacity to see, of sense perception.”⁷³ Of course, the meaning of any word is determined by its context, so the question is whether the meaning of *blepō* in the context of Acts 1:9 refers to perception with the eye or to some kind of spiritual perception. Significantly, the context presents the ascension as an observable historical event in the same category as the other events in the life of Jesus.⁷⁴ It is not presented as a “visionary” experience. Furthermore, Luke uses other terms in addition to *blepō* to describe the visibility of this event. In addition to using a form of the word *blepō* twice in these three verses, Luke also uses the words *atenizō* (1:10) and *theaomai* (1:11). I will discuss the way these words are used in the New Testament below, but suffice it for now to say that they provide no support for the idea that the apostles saw the ascension only with the “eye of faith.”

Luke next tells us that after Jesus had said these things (1:6–8), and while they were looking on, “he was lifted up.” The verb is the aorist, passive, indicative of *epairō* (“to lift up”). As we observed above, Randall Otto argues that in the passive voice, *epairō* “does not have to do with an active *physical* lifting up but with a lifting up of someone in stature or dignity.” It has to do with “exaltation.” Otto again cites the BAGD lexicon as support for this interpretation, and again there are a number of problems with his use of the evidence. First, the BAGD lexicon does not indicate *epairō* means “exaltation” when used in the passive voice. It lists under the passive use of the verb two subcategories: a literal meaning (“be taken up”) and two figurative meanings (“offer resistance” and “be presumptuous”). It lists the use of *epairō* in Acts 1:9 under the *literal* meaning.⁷⁵ The newly revised third edition of Bauer’s lexicon is even clearer in that it simply places the use of *epairō* in Acts 1:9 under the definition “to cause to move upward, *lift up, hold up*.”⁷⁶

⁷³ Karl Dahn, “*horaō*,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), III:515. Hereafter abbreviated *NIDNTT*.

⁷⁴ See Barrett, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ See BAGD, s.v. ἐπαίρω, 2,a, (p. 282).

⁷⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third ed., edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 357. The third edition of Bauer’s lexicon is abbreviated *BDAG*.

Otto also makes much of the fact that the BAGD lexicon lists 1 Clement 45:8 as another text that includes the verb *epairō* in the passive voice. He says, “As we can plainly here see, the only other similar use of this word does *not* denote a literal and physical elevation of the person, but rather describes in figurative terms the elevation of the person in honor and dignity, i.e., exaltation.”⁷⁷ Several observations are in order. In the first place, it must be noted that the editors of the lexicon do not place 1 Clement 45:8 under either of the two figurative meanings of the verb. It is listed, along with Acts 1:9, under the literal meaning of the verb (i.e. to “be taken up”). Secondly, the editors define the meaning of the verb in 1 Clement 45:8 as “the exaltation *to heaven* of those who endured.”⁷⁸ The passage in 1 Clement is discussing those who suffered persecution and martyrdom but persevered in faith until the end. They may have died, but they were “exalted to heaven” or “lifted up to heaven.”⁷⁹ Of course, in 1 Clement this is not referring to the physical lifting up of their bodies to heaven. It is referring to the lifting up of their souls or spirits to heaven. But this is not something that is found in the meaning of the verb itself. It is something that must be determined by the context. Finally, it is incorrect to claim that 1 Clement 45:8 contains the only other similar use of this verb. It may be the only other use of this verb in the passive voice that has been found thus far in the literature of this time, but this is not as significant as Otto assumes.

The most important clue to the meaning of the word *epairō* in Acts 1:9 is its use elsewhere in the New Testament. In these books, the verb is used approximately 20 times. An examination of each of the texts in which it is found reveals that *epairō* is not used to refer to the lifting up of someone in stature, dignity, or honor. In other words, it is not used to mean “exaltation” in the New Testament literature.⁸⁰ In the majority of cases, it is used in connection with the “lifting up” of one’s eyes (e.g., Matt. 17:8), or one’s voice (e.g., Acts 2:14). It is also used to refer to the lifting up of one’s hands (Luke 24:50; 1 Tim. 2:8), one’s head (Luke 21:28), or the sail of a ship (Acts 27:40). It is used once in the figurative sense of “rising up in opposition” (2 Cor. 10:5) and once in the

⁷⁷ Otto, *Coming in the Clouds*, 253.

⁷⁸ See BAGD, s.v. ἐπαίρω, 2,a, (p. 282). Emphasis mine.

⁷⁹ The passage in 1 Clement 45 does not *exclude* the idea of honor, but neither is it *limited* to the idea of honor. The passage includes the idea of the souls of the martyrs being lifted up to heaven.

⁸⁰ It should be noted that the verb *epairō* was sometimes used to communicate the idea of exaltation in the Septuagint. This usage is not attested in the Bauer lexicon of New Testament and other early Christian literature.

sense of “being presumptuous” (2 Cor. 11:20). The only meaning of *epairō* that makes sense in the context of Acts 1:9–11 is the literal meaning “to cause to move upward.” The passive voice does not change the meaning of this verb. It simply indicates that Jesus was not the agent who lifted himself up. He was “lifted up” by someone or something else.

Furthermore, even if it were true that the verb *epairō* had the idea of exaltation in honor as one of its possible meanings in the first century, it is not the only verb used to describe the actual ascension of Jesus in this passage. Luke also uses the terms *hupolambanō*, *poreuomai* (twice), and *analambanō*. Both *hupolambanō*, and *analambanō* are typically used to mean “to take up” and *poreuomai* is typically used to mean “to go” or “to proceed.” The standard lexicons do not list “exaltation” as a normal meaning of any of these terms. In other words, what Luke is describing in this passage is a visible upward motion of a person. This does *not* mean that exaltation was not involved in the ascension of Jesus. Luke indicates elsewhere that Christ’s exaltation involved both his resurrection and ascension (cf. Acts 2:30–34), but the fact that Jesus was exalted in his resurrection and ascension does not mean that there was no literal bodily ascension any more than it means there was no literal bodily resurrection. It should also be pointed out that when Luke speaks of exaltation in Acts 2 and elsewhere, he generally uses the verb *hupsoō* (cf. Acts 2:33; 5:31). He does not use that term in Acts 1:9–11. The primary emphasis in Acts 1:9–11 is on what the apostles saw with their eyes. Luke focuses on the theological explanation of this event elsewhere.

Luke concludes verse 9 with the statement, “and a cloud took him out of their sight.” The first question that must be answered in connection with this phrase is the precise meaning of *kai*, the Greek word translated “and.” The significant question is whether *kai* is being used here as a simple connective conjunction or as an explicative conjunction.⁸¹ In other words, is the intended meaning: “he was lifted up, *and then* a cloud took him out of their sight” (connective)? Or is the meaning: “he was lifted up; *that is*, a cloud took him out of their sight” (explicative)? In terms of what Luke says the apostles witnessed, the question is whether:

⁸¹ See BDAG, s.v. *καί*, (pp. 494–96). All references to “BDAG” are to the third edition of the Bauer lexicon.

1. They saw Jesus ascend a certain distance and then disappear from their sight when he reached the cloud — ascension *to* a cloud.
2. They saw the cloud appear to actively lift Jesus upward a certain distance before he disappeared from their sight — ascension *in* or *with* a cloud.
3. They saw Jesus suddenly vanish into a cloud while he was standing before them without any visible upward motion of either Jesus or the cloud.

Answer 1 would be the implication of the connective use of *kai*. The explicative use of *kai* could imply either answer 2 or answer 3. The only way to determine which answer is the most likely meaning intended by Luke is to examine the context.

The least likely answer to our question is number 3, namely that Luke intended to say that Jesus simply vanished while standing in front of the apostles. There are a number of reasons for this conclusion. In the first place, Luke has spoken previously of Jesus vanishing, and he used entirely different language to describe what happened. After speaking to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke tells us that Jesus “vanished from their sight” (Luke 24:31). The specific words he uses to describe this are: καὶ αὐτὸς ἄφαντος ἐγένετο ἀπ’ αὐτῶν (*kai autos aphantos egeneto ap autōn*). The words *aphantos egeneto* can be literally translated “became invisible” or simply “vanished.” If Luke’s intent in Acts 1:9 were to describe a situation in which Jesus simply vanished, we are forced to ask why he did not use the language he used elsewhere to describe such an occurrence. In the second place, the immediate context itself forces us to reject the idea that Jesus simply vanished while standing before the apostles. Both Acts 1:10 and 1:11 describe the apostles looking intently into the sky.⁸² If Jesus simply vanished and there was nothing that they witnessed moving upward, then there is no reason whatsoever for them to be described as gazing intently into the sky. In order for verses 10 and 11 to make any sense at all, the apostles had to have seen Jesus, or the cloud, or both Jesus and the cloud moving upward some distance.

If option 3 is ruled out, the only exegetically possible answers are 1 and 2. The strongest contextual evidence for answer 1 is the fact that verse 11 clearly states that the apostles saw Jesus going. If answer 2 requires us to say that Jesus himself was not visible

⁸² I will explain below the reasons for understanding the primary meaning of *eis ton ouranon* to be “into the sky.”

at all during the ascent of the cloud, then the clear statement in verse 11 would seem to rule out the possibility of answer 2. The strongest evidence in favor of answer 2 is the apparent meaning of the verb *hupelaben* in verse 9. This is the aorist active indicative form of the verb *hupolambanō*. According to the BDAG lexicon, the verb is used in Acts 1:9 in the sense of “to cause to ascend, take up.”⁸³ This use of the verb would seem to imply that the cloud acted as “the vehicle of ascent.”⁸⁴

The determining factor would appear to be the meaning of the words translated “out of their sight” in verse 9.⁸⁵ As we have already observed, a number of hyper-preterists understand these words to mean that Jesus departed invisibly in the glory cloud. This can be understood in a couple of different ways. I have already noted the extreme exegetical problems with understanding it to mean that Jesus simply vanished while standing before the apostles. However, it can also be understood to mean that the apostles saw the cloud ascend but did not see Jesus himself ascend because the cloud hid him from their sight throughout the entire ascension. There are at least two problems with this interpretation. First, verse 11 specifically tells us that the apostles saw Jesus go. It does not say that they only saw the cloud go. In fact, verse 11 does not even mention the cloud. Secondly, verse 9 does not specify precisely *when* the cloud took him from their sight. Even if we understand the verse to be saying that Jesus was surrounded by a cloud while he was standing before them and then was lifted up with, in, or by the cloud, this does not mean that Jesus could not be seen by the apostles from the moment the cloud first surrounded him. When verse 9 says that Jesus was taken “out of their sight,” it simply means that at some point in the ascension he was no longer visible to them.

There does not appear to be enough evidence to say conclusively that *kai* is definitely connective or definitely explicative. There is some support for both views. What is important to note is that either interpretation is perfectly consistent with the traditional understanding of the visible ascension of Christ. If *kai* is connective, then the apostles saw Jesus ascend to a certain point (the cloud) at which he was no longer visible to them. If *kai* is explicative, then the apostles saw Jesus ascend with the cloud to a

⁸³ See BDAG, s.v. ὑπολαμβάνω, 1 (p. 1038).

⁸⁴ Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina, Vol. 5, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press), 27.

⁸⁵ Greek, ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν (apo tōn ophthalmōn).

certain point after which he was no longer visible to them. Regardless of which interpretation is chosen, verse 9 cannot be used to say that the apostles did not see Jesus go when verse 11 explicitly says the apostles did see Jesus go.

The final question we must ask in connection with Acts 1:9 regards the significance of the cloud. Some have seen, in the reference to the cloud, allusions to the biblical account of the ascension of Elijah (cf. 2 Kings 2:11) or to non-canonical accounts of the ascension of Moses.⁸⁶ While it is possible that Luke intends to bring these accounts to mind, the most obvious biblical allusion is to the glory cloud. Throughout the Old Testament, the glory cloud is used to describe and signify the presence of God (cf. Ex. 13:21–22; 14:19ff.; 19:16; 24:15–18; 33:9–10; 40:34–37; 1 Kgs. 8:10–11; Ps. 78:14; 99:7; 105:39; Isa. 4:5; 19:1; Ezek. 1:4). A reference to “clouds” is also prominent in Daniel’s prophecy of the coming of the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13–14), a prophecy that is alluded to frequently in the New Testament. In the Gospels, the glory cloud is prominent in the account of the transfiguration (cf. Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34–35). If Jesus ascended to a certain point (the cloud) before being removed from the sight of the apostles, then there is the possibility (however slight) that the cloud in Acts 1:9 is simply a natural cloud. If the cloud ascended with Jesus, then the cloud is much more obviously a reference to the glory cloud.

Of more significance is the possible allusion to Daniel 7:13–14 in Acts 1:9. Daniel describes a vision in which he saw one like a “son of man”⁸⁷ coming with the clouds of heaven up to the Ancient of Days to receive a kingdom. In the Gospels, Jesus regularly refers to himself as the “Son of Man” (e.g., Matt. 11:19; 16:13; 17:9; 20:28).⁸⁸ He also speaks often of the Son of Man coming in clouds (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27). In Acts 1:9–11, we have an account of Jesus ascending into heaven and a reference to a cloud taking him. Since Daniel’s vision is a vision of one coming with the clouds to the Ancient of Days in heaven and receiving a kingdom, is the

⁸⁶ See Philo, *Life of Moses* 2:291; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 4:326. There are also pagan accounts of ascension (cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14:805–851), but the likelihood that these influenced Luke is remote at best.

⁸⁷ The section of Daniel in which these words are found was written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. In Aramaic, the words are: **בַּר אֲנָשׁ** (bar ’ēnaš). The Septuagint translates these words, υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου (huios anthrōpou).

⁸⁸ He uses various forms of this self-designation (Greek, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) over 80 times in the Gospels.

ascension of Christ part of what Daniel foresaw?⁸⁹ It seems quite possible, especially when we consider the fact that in Acts 2, Peter declares that Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, was seated at the right hand of God, and made both Lord and Christ (cf. Acts 2:22–36).⁹⁰

Acts 1:10

And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes,

Luke continues his account by explaining what happened while Jesus ascended. He begins the verse with the phrase, “And while they were gazing.”⁹¹ The word *kai* is used simply as a connective conjunction (“and”). It tells us what happened next. The word *hōs* is a temporal conjunction meaning “while.” The following word, *atenizontes* is used with the verb *ēsan* as a periphrastic participle, which is translated “they were gazing.” This word is the participial form of the verb *atenizō*, which means to “look intently at” or to “stare at” something or someone.⁹² Again, Luke emphasizes the fact that the apostles were witnessing something happen. This word is used 14 times in the New Testament, and “in each NT use (all but two of which occur in the Lucan writings) *atenizō* seems to emphasize the intensity of the look.”⁹³

The apostles are said to be gazing “into heaven.”⁹⁴ This is the first of four uses of this exact phrase in Acts 1:9–11.⁹⁵ The Greek word *ouranos* is used in a number of ways in Scripture. It can be used, for example, to refer to the dwelling place of God (e.g., Heb. 8:1). It can also be used to refer to that part of creation distinct from the earth, namely, the sky (e.g., Matt. 8:20; Heb. 11:12). It is unlikely that *ouranos* is being used here to

⁸⁹ It should be noted that the vision is not a vision of one coming from heaven down to earth.

⁹⁰ If this interpretation is correct, it has significant implications for our understanding of Jesus’ references to the “coming of the Son of Man in clouds.” If Jesus was using these words to refer to the events surrounding his ascension and the inauguration of his kingdom (including the judgment of the nation of Israel) rather than to his Second Advent, then his assurances that this “coming” would happen very soon are much more readily comprehensible.

⁹¹ Greek, καὶ ὡς ἀτενίζοντες ἦσαν (kai hōs atenizontes ēsan).

⁹² See BDAG, s.v. ἀτενίζω, (p. 148).

⁹³ W.L. Liefeld, “*atenizō*,” *NIDNTT*, III:520. Aside from Acts 1:10, this verb is found in the following texts: Luke 4:20; 22:56; Acts 3:4; 3:12; 6:15; 7:55; 10:4; 11:6; 13:9; 14:9; 23:1; 2 Cor. 3:7; 3:13).

⁹⁴ Greek, εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν (eis ton ouranon).

⁹⁵ The third of the four uses of this phrase is not found in some Greek manuscripts. Its accidental omission, however, is more readily explainable than its insertion. For the textual evidence, see Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 245.

mean the transcendent abode of God, angels, and deceased saints in these verses.⁹⁶ This interpretation seems highly unlikely for at least two reasons. First, in two of the four places where the phrase is used in these verses, the apostles are said to be “looking” into heaven (v. 10; v. 11a), and in one place they are said to have seen Jesus go into heaven (v. 11b). Since Luke does not present the ascension event in terms of a visionary experience in which the witness or witnesses “see the heavens opened” (e.g., Acts 7:56; 10:11; Ezek. 1:1) or in which they have their eyes opened to something that is normally invisible (e.g., 2 Kings 6:17), it seems more likely that the term *ouranos* is being used in the sense of “the sky.” Second, if the apostles actually saw Jesus go into the normally invisible dwelling place of God at this point, then Luke’s claim that “a cloud took him out of their sight” (1:9) becomes inexplicable. It is true that the ultimate *terminus ad quem* of Jesus’ ascension is the right hand of God in the heavenly places (cf. Acts 2:32–33), but the *terminus ad quem* does not appear to be what is specifically described in the text of Acts 1:9–11. These verses describe that which was objectively visible to all.

The apostles stood there on the mountain gazing intently as Jesus went. The Greek word translated “went” is *poreuomenou*, the participial form of *poreuomai*. This genitive absolute participle is translated “as he went” in the ESV. It could also be translated “while he went.” The word *poreuomai* is quite common in the New Testament being used about 150 times. Although it is sometimes used figuratively to mean the way one lives or conducts himself (e.g., Acts 14:16; 1 Pet. 4:3) or less frequently, “die” (e.g., Luke 22:22, 33), it is normally used in the literal sense of to go, proceed, or travel.⁹⁷ It is not used to refer to exaltation in honor, stature, or dignity.

While the apostles were intently watching as Jesus departed, two men (*andres duo*) in white clothing suddenly appeared standing beside them. The appearance of the two men immediately brings to mind the appearance of the two men (*andres duo*) at Jesus’ transfiguration (Luke 9:30) as well as the appearance of the two men (*andres duo*) in “dazzling apparel” at the empty tomb of Jesus (Luke 24:4). The two men who appeared at the transfiguration are identified as Moses and Elijah. The two men who

⁹⁶ Although it must be noted that this is the way the editors of the BDAG lexicon chose to categorize its use in Acts 1:10 and 1:11; see BDAG, 739.

⁹⁷ See BDAG, s.v. πορεύω, 1 (p. 853). BDAG provides this definition: “to move over an area, gener. with a point of departure or destination specified.” Cf. also, G. Ebel, “*poreuomai*,” *NIDNTT*, III:946.

appear at the empty tomb are not specifically identified. Are the two men who appear to the apostles in Acts 1:10 Moses and Elijah, or are they simply two angels? The text does not explicitly tell us, so either possibility must be left open.⁹⁸

Acts 1:11

and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

When we reach Acts 1:11, we reach the center of the debate with hyper-preterist interpreters. As we have already seen in setting forth the views of various hyper-preterists, most of their comments center on this verse. The reason for this will become evident as we proceed.

Acts 1:11 tells us what the two men in white clothing said to the apostles after suddenly appearing. They ask the apostles a question: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?” Then they make an assertion: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” The verb translated “looking” is a participial form of the verb *blepō*. I have already discussed the meaning of this term at length under the discussion of verse 9, so there is no need to repeat it here. I have also already discussed the probable meaning of the phrase translated “into heaven.” The question asked by the two men indicates that the apostles are continuing to look into the sky. The two men ask them why.

As noted above, one hyper-preterist author claims that if Jesus was to return in the same manner that he departed, then the question the two men asked was “stupid.” He argues that there are only two possibilities: “The first good explanation is that they meant he would return, but not soon.” The second possibility he suggests is that the verb *erchomai* in verse 11 means “to proceed” rather than “to come.” I will examine his assertions regarding the meaning of *erchomai* below. Suffice it to say for now that he has not shown any absurdity with what he lists as the first possibility. Jesus has commanded

⁹⁸ It is interesting to note that Jewish tradition asserted that both Moses and Elijah had ascended to God (Of course, Scripture explicitly affirms that Elijah ascended; cf. 2 Kgs. 2:11–12. The alleged ascension of Moses is only found in non-canonical Jewish sources). In addition, the Greek word *andres* usually refers to human beings rather than angels. However, if the two men who appeared were Moses and Elijah, it is difficult to understand why Luke did not say this explicitly as he did in Luke 9:30.

the apostles to await the promise of the Father in Jerusalem. He has told them that they will be his witnesses to the end of the earth. In other words, he has given them their marching orders. They should not be standing there looking into the sky. They should be in Jerusalem awaiting the outpouring of the Spirit. They have work to do. The fact that Jesus' return will not be immediate is the necessary implication of the commands Jesus gives the apostles in Acts 1:4–8.

The two men follow their question with this assertion: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”⁹⁹ The words *houtos ho Iēsous* (“This Jesus”) indicate continuity. It is this Jesus and no other who will come. The words stress continuity. The word *analēmphtheis* is an adjectival participle translated “who was taken up.” It is a participial form of the verb *analambanō*, which usually means “to take up.”¹⁰⁰ It is not a word used in the New Testament to refer to exaltation in honor or dignity.

The two men state that this same Jesus who has been taken up from them “will come.” They do not say *when* he will come, only *that* he will come. The word translated “will come” is *eleusetai*, which is the future indicative form of the verb *erchomai*.¹⁰¹ The verb *erchomai* is used almost 600 times in the New Testament, making it one of the most frequently used words in the Bible. The standard Greek lexicon of New Testament literature lists several ways in which the verb is used. It is most often used to describe “movement from one point to another, with focus on approach from the narrator’s perspective.”¹⁰² In other words, its usual meaning is “to come.” This is especially evident in cases such as Acts 1:11 where it is used opposite a form of *poreuomai*, which means “to go.”

As I noted above, one hyper-preterist author argues that the verb *erchomai* does not mean “to come” in Acts 1:11, but rather means “to proceed.” According to this

⁹⁹ Greek, οὗτος ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀναλημφθεὶς ἀφ’ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οὕτως ἐλεύσεται ὃν τρόπον ἐθεάσασθε αὐτὸν πορευόμενον εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν.

¹⁰⁰ See BDAG, s.v. ἀναλαμβάνω, 1 (p. 66).

¹⁰¹ The future tense is used in this verse as a simple predictive future, the most common use of the future tense. It simply indicates that something will take place in the future. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 568.

¹⁰² See BDAG, s.v. ἔρχομαι, 1 (p. 393).

author, Jesus has ascended, and he will proceed to the Father in the same manner. As already noted, he writes:

“This Jesus...thus will *proceed* in the way you beheld Him going, *into heaven*.”
In other words, He has ascended, and proceeds to His Father in heaven.

There are a number of problems with this interpretation of the text. In the first place, although the verb *erchomai* is used to mean “proceed” or “to go” in a few places in the New Testament, it is a rare use of the verb. When *erchomai* is used opposite a form of *poreuomai*, the likelihood that it is a virtual synonym is even less likely (e.g., Matt. 8:9; John 14:3; 16:7–8). The fact that a word *can* mean something does not mean that it *does* mean that in a particular text. Which possible meaning of a word is the actual meaning is determined by its context, and in the context of Acts 1:11, the word *erchomai* means “to come.”

There is another serious exegetical problem with this hyper-preterist interpretation of the text. In the comment quoted above, the punctuation and italicized emphasis provided by the hyper-preterist author makes it appear as if the two men said in effect, “This Jesus will proceed into heaven in the way you beheld Him going.” In other words, he punctuates the text so that “into heaven” is connected to the verb *erchomai* rather than to the verb *poreuomai*. The text of the two men’s statement actually reads as follows: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”¹⁰³ The words *eis ton ouranon* (“into heaven”) tell us where Jesus was “taken up,” and they tell us where the apostles saw Jesus “go.” But the words “into heaven” are not used to describe the destination of *erchomai*. All that is said of Christ’s future “coming” (*erchomai*) is that it will be in the “same manner” as his past “going” (*poreuomai*). The text does not say that the destination of both his coming and going is the same.

John Noë also offers a hyper-preterist explanation of verse 11 that centers on a particular understanding of the word *erchomai*. I quoted his argument in its entirety above. Here I will simply note that Noë argues that the word *erchomai* “actually means ‘comes or goes.’” He continues, “*Erchomai*—comes and goes—is the general, overall manner in which all his many visible comings have occurred. But there were and are

¹⁰³ Cf., note 95 for Greek text.

other comings that are not visible.”¹⁰⁴ There are several problems with Noë’s argument. First, and most importantly, *erchomai* does not mean “comes or goes.” It can mean *either* “to come” *or* “to go,” depending on the context, but it does not mean “comes or goes.”¹⁰⁵ Second, *erchomai* does not describe the “manner” of Christ’s many visible comings. The word *erchomai* is not used as an adverb here. It is a verb that usually means “to come” and sometimes (although much more rarely) means “to go.”

The next issue addressed by the two men in white is the manner of Christ’s coming. They tell the apostles that this same Jesus: “will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (lit. “will come thus, in the manner you saw him going into heaven”).¹⁰⁶ We have already looked at the meaning of *eleusetai* (“will come”). The word *houtōs* is an adverb meaning “in this way.”¹⁰⁷ The construction *hon tropon* is a compound adverbial phrase corresponding to *houtōs*. It means “in the manner in which” or “just as.”¹⁰⁸ The use of *houtōs* together with *hon tropon* serves to emphasize the point that Jesus will come in the same way that he departed. So, in what manner or way did the apostles see Jesus go into heaven? This is one of the key questions in the debate with hyper-preterism.

According to Max King, the real meaning of *hon tropon* “as that which qualifies His arrival, is missed in my opinion, when it is interpreted as a reference to the outward physical circumstances of His ascension.” Instead, King says, “the focus is on the person – this *same* Jesus.”¹⁰⁹ This is a highly unlikely, if not impossible, interpretation of this phrase. As a compound adverbial phrase corresponding to the adverb *houtōs*, it modifies the verb “to come.” He will come in a certain way – “the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” The construction *hon tropon* does not modify the “person” of Christ. It does not even make sense to ask what “manner” or “way” is Christ’s person?

In the statements of various hyper-preterist views above, we observed that John Noë asks, “how much ‘like mannered’ does his return to earth need to be?” He goes on

¹⁰⁴ John Noë, “The Superiority of Preterism: An Evaluation of the Four Major Evangelical Views of the Return of Christ”, 364.

¹⁰⁵ This may be all that Noë is saying, but if it is, it is far from clear.

¹⁰⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ See BDAG, s.v. οὕτως/οὕτως, 2 (p. 742).

¹⁰⁸ See BDAG, s.v. τρόπος, 1 (p. 1017). For other uses of this construction in the New Testament, see Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34; Acts 7:28; 15:11; 27:25; 2 Tim. 3:8.

¹⁰⁹ Max R. King, *The Cross and the Parousia*, 495, n. 92.

to point out differences between texts allegedly describing the Second Coming and the description of the ascension in Acts 1:11. Based on the way these words are used elsewhere in the New Testament, it is unnecessary to press the words *hon tropon* to mean “exactly the same in every detail.” No one affirms, for example, that the coming of Christ must also involve his bodily ascension. In response to Noë and others, however, it must be insisted that whatever else “in like manner” means, it does not mean in a completely different manner. This is why determining the “manner” of Christ’s departure is essential.

Most hyper-preterists insist that the apostles did not see Jesus ascend, therefore, if his coming was to be “in like manner” it too was to be invisible.¹¹⁰ In the section above outlining various hyper-preterist interpretations, we observe, for example, that Randall Otto claims, “the disciples had not seen Christ going up to heaven.” And John Noë says, “it must be pointed out that Christ’s disciples *did not* see Him ascend into heaven.” The problem with this assertion is that it directly contradicts Acts 1:11, which explicitly says that the apostles “saw *him* go into heaven.” The word translated “saw” is *etheasasthe*, the aorist indicative form of the verb *theaomai*. In the New Testament documents, this verb is normally used of literal sight.¹¹¹

Both Otto and Noë claim that the apostles did not see Christ ascend because the cloud “veiled” or “hid” him from their sight. But that is not what the text says. First, Acts 1:9 tells us that the cloud “took him” out of their sight. The verb that is used to describe the action of the cloud is a form of *hupolambanō*. This verb generally means “to take up.” It does not mean “to hide” or “to veil.” The verbs normally used in the New Testament to mean “hide” are *kaluptō* and *kruptō*. Second, Acts 1:9 does not say that the cloud immediately took him from their sight as he stood on the ground in front of them, and the clear statement in Acts 1:11 makes such an interpretation of Acts 1:9 impossible. The clear statement in Acts 1:11 leaves two interpretive options for the meaning of Acts 1:9. Either Jesus himself visibly ascended until he reached the cloud, at which point he was no longer visible. Or Jesus ascended visibly with the cloud, and at some point in his

¹¹⁰ However, note Stevens’ view to the contrary.

¹¹¹ See BDAG, s.v. θεάομαι, 1,a (p. 445).

ascent, he was no longer visible to the apostles. As we have already noted, either interpretation is exegetically possible.

The question remains: in what manner did the apostles see Jesus go into heaven? The primary emphasis throughout these verses is on the visible manner of the ascension event. The ascension of Jesus occurred “as they were *looking on*” (v. 9). As Jesus departed, they were “*gazing*” intently (v. 10). The two men in white ask the apostles why they are standing there “*looking into heaven*” (v. 11). And it is explicitly asserted that the apostles “*saw him go into heaven*” (v. 11). There is little else Luke could have said to describe an event that was objectively visible. Whether the manner of his ascent was also in or with a cloud does not alter the fact that Jesus remained visible. The ascent was also a bodily ascent. The apostles are talking to the resurrected Jesus immediately prior to the ascension. They are not having a collective visionary experience. They are not talking to the incorporeal “spirit” of Jesus (cf. Luke 24:39). Jesus is standing before them in his resurrected body, and he ascends as they look on.

The two men in white tell the apostles that Jesus will come in the same manner that they saw him go. Since the manner of his ascent was visible and bodily, the manner in which he will come will likewise be visible and bodily. Furthermore, the implication of the word translated “will come” is that Christ will return to the place from which he departed, namely, this earth. It must be noted, however, that the two men do not say that the circumstances of Christ’s coming will be the same as the circumstances of his going. Thus the objections of Russell, Noë and others who point out obvious differences between Christ’s ascension and his second coming are largely irrelevant and beside the point. Those differences have to do with the surrounding circumstances, not the actual manner of his ascension and return. Since the ascension and Second Coming have different purposes in the outworking of redemptive history, we would expect there to be different surrounding circumstances. The ascension of Christ is part of the nexus of events (e.g., the resurrection, the ascension, the destruction of Jerusalem, etc.) that marks the inauguration of the kingdom, while the Second Coming of Christ is part of the nexus of events (e.g., the Second Coming, the general resurrection, the final judgment, etc.) that marks the consummation of the kingdom. Acts 1:11 simply affirms that Christ will come in the same manner (visibly and bodily) that he ascended. Acts 1:11, by itself, does not

provide details regarding the circumstances surrounding his return. That which it does describe, however, clearly indicates that it has not yet occurred.

Summary of Problems with the Various Hyper-Preterist Views

Having examined the text of Acts 1:9–11 in some detail, it may prove helpful at this point to summarize some of the main problems with the various hyper-preterist interpretations outlined above. Many of these problems were pointed out as we proceeded through the text, but since some of the hyper-preterists listed above presented arguments not directly related to the text of Acts 1:9–11 itself, these must be addressed as well.

J. Stuart Russell

J. Stuart Russell devotes very little space to Acts 1:9–11 in his lengthy book *The Parousia*, and he does not offer any substantial exegetical arguments in support of his hyper-preterist interpretation of this text. His main argument is that it is not credible to suggest the apostles would have returned to Jerusalem rejoicing (cf, Luke 24:52–53) if they understood that Jesus' return would not occur very soon. This, however, is not really so much an argument as it is a statement about what Russell considers to be possible. The reason the apostles returned to Jerusalem rejoicing has to do not merely with the promise of his return but also with the meaning of the ascension itself. The ascension is Jesus' answer to their question about the kingdom. It is evident in the following chapters of Acts and in the other books of the New Testament that the apostles now clearly understood that Jesus had been seated at the right hand of God and made both Lord and Christ (e.g., Peter's sermon in Acts 2). They now understood clearly that his kingdom had been inaugurated. They also apparently understood that the promised outpouring of the Spirit was now imminent. These are all perfectly comprehensible reasons for rejoicing.

Max King

Max King also devotes very little space to an examination of Acts 1:9–11 in his massive book *The Cross and the Parousia*. His explanation of the meaning of this text is

found in a single brief footnote. In this note, he argues that we should understand Acts 1:9–11 in light of our understanding of the meaning of the term *parousia* as “presence” or “arrival” rather than “return.” The “arrival” of Christ is then determined according to the manner of his ascension. According to King, the meaning of the words, “in like manner” do not refer to the nature of the ascension itself but to the person of Christ. The point of these words is that this *same* Jesus will arrive. As we have seen, there are essentially two problems with King’s interpretation. First, the Greek phrase translated “in the same way” or “in like manner” is a compound adverbial phrase. It modifies the verb, not the noun. Second, the manner of his ascension was visible and bodily. According to verse 11, the apostles saw him go. This does not refer to spiritual insight. If we were to suppose that Luke is talking about spiritual insight, we would have quite the difficulty explaining the meaning of the phrase “a cloud took him out of their sight.” Did the cloud take away their spiritual insight into the truth of Christ’s exaltation? Hardly. In Acts 1:9–11, Luke is referring to that which is objectively visible.

Randall Otto

I have addressed virtually all of Randall Otto’s arguments during the process of examining the text itself. Otto’s fundamental problem is his denial that Christ’s resurrection body was a physical body. As we noted above, he describes Christ’s resurrection body as “evanescent” and “vaporous” in quality and says that his post-resurrection existence was therefore generally invisible. It should go without saying that a denial of the bodily (i.e. physical) resurrection of Jesus is serious heresy and the hallmark of theological liberalism and skepticism. Scripture repeatedly affirms that the resurrection of Jesus was bodily (e.g. Luke 24:39–43). His tomb was empty because his body had been raised (Luke 24:3–7). In addition to basing his argument on an unbiblical doctrine of Christ’s resurrection body, Otto also attempts to marshal support from the use of certain Greek words. However, as we have noted, his assertions concerning the meaning of words such as *epairō* and *blepō* are simply false.¹¹²

¹¹² Kenneth Davies’ interpretation of Acts 1:9–11 essentially follows that of Randall Otto, but it should be noted that Davies does *not* explicitly affirm his agreement with Otto regarding the nature of Christ’s resurrection body. To my knowledge, most hyper-preterists do not deny that Jesus’ physical body was resurrected. What they generally deny is that *our* physical bodies are resurrected.

Edward E. Stevens

Edward Stevens' explanation of Acts 1:9–11 draws on larger biblical themes and does not focus as much on the specifics of the text itself. According to Stevens, Acts 1:9–11 is best understood in terms of the imagery found in the Day of Atonement rituals. His interpretation is outlined in some detail above. Therefore, rather than restate his views, I will simply respond at this point to some of his basic arguments. Regarding the connection with the Day of Atonement ritual, Stevens asserts that Jesus ascension was his ascension into the heavenly Holy of Holies in order to present his sacrificial blood and make final atonement for his people. After he has completed this ritual in the heavenly Holy of Holies, he will come back out to appear to his awaiting saints in the outer courts of the heavenly Temple (cf. Heb. 9:26–28). According to Stevens, the incense cloud involved in the Old Covenant Day of Atonement ritual is a type of the glory cloud that appears at Jesus' ascension.

Several observations are in order. First, it should be noted that there is nothing in the text of Acts 1:9–11 itself indicating that it should be understood as a fulfillment of the Day of Atonement ritual. Stevens says that the Yom Kippur imagery is “prominently featured,” but there is no mention of sacrifice, or blood, or the heavenly temple anywhere in Acts 1:9–11. There is a cloud, but there is nothing in the text indicating that the cloud is the anti-type of the cloud of incense in the Day of Atonement ritual. In our outline of the various hyper-preterist views above, we observed that Stevens says the incense cloud symbolizes “the glory cloud Presence of God.” The most serious problem with this idea is the fact that in the Day of Atonement ritual, the cloud of incense was to be created inside the Holy of Holies where the glory cloud of God was already present. The glory cloud of God was present in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34–38), and it was present in the Temple (1 Kings 8:10–11).¹¹³ The Day of Atonement ritual outlined in Leviticus 16 assumes that the glory cloud of God is actually present in the Holy of Holies. The cloud of incense is not created to symbolize something that is already there in reality. It is created to protect the High Priest (cf. Lev. 16:13).

¹¹³ Later in Israel's history, the glory of the Lord left the Temple (cf. Ezek. 10), but when the law concerning the Day of Atonement ritual was given, the presence of the glory of the Lord in the Holy of Holies was assumed.

Another apparent problem with Stevens understanding of the cloud typology is the difference in its location in Leviticus and Acts. In Acts 1:9–11, the cloud is apparently located in sky and is apparently visible to the apostles. In the Day of Atonement ritual as outlined in Leviticus 16, however, the incense cloud is created *inside* the Holy of Holies itself.¹¹⁴ If Acts 1:9–11 is to be understood in terms of the Day of Atonement imagery, it would seem that the cloud should be inside the heavenly Holy of Holies (rather than in the earthly dimension outside of the heavenly Temple), and it should be invisible to the apostles.

Another difficulty involved with pressing the details of the Day of Atonement ritual too far is the fact that in the ceremony itself, the High Priest entered and exited the Holy of Holies *more than once*.¹¹⁵ After bringing the incense and the blood of the bull into the Holiest place (Lev. 16:12–14) and sprinkling the blood on the Mercy Seat, the High Priest kills the goat of the sin offering (at the brazen altar), brings its blood inside the Holiest place, and sprinkles it on the Mercy Seat in the same way that he sprinkled the blood of the bull (16:15). If Christ entered the heavenly Holy of Holies in or near A.D. 30, and if his exiting the Holy of Holies in or near A.D. 70 was the Second Coming, then what are the other entrances and exits from the Holy of Holies? Why press a detail such as the incense cloud but not the repeated entrances into the Holy of Holies?¹¹⁶

Another serious problem with Stevens' application of the Day of Atonement imagery becomes apparent when we examine the book of Hebrews. According to Stevens, Christ ascended as our High Priest into the Holy of Holies around A.D. 30. While in the Holy Of Holies, Christ presents his sacrificial blood and completes our atonement. Once the atonement is fully and finally accomplished, Christ comes back out of the Holy of Holies to announce that the atonement has been completed. This, according to Stevens, occurred somewhere around A.D. 70. There are a number of

¹¹⁴ According to the Levitical instructions, the High Priest takes a censer full of coals from the altar (which is in the outer court) and two handfuls of incense. He takes the coals and the incense behind the veil into the Holy of Holies and puts the incense on the fire in order that the cloud of incense may cover the Mercy Seat (See Lev. 16:12–13).

¹¹⁵ Cf. R.K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D.J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 172.

¹¹⁶ There are a number of other problems that are created if we attempt to press every detail of the Day of Atonement imagery into the Ascension account. Jesus, for example, is the anti-type not only of the High Priest, but also of the sacrificial victim. How is the scapegoat type fulfilled in the Ascension? It is simply reading into the text to say that Day of Atonement imagery is “prominently featured” in Acts 1:9–11.

questions raised by this suggested scenario. First, why would it take Jesus 40 years to present his blood and have it accepted? Second, if Hebrews was written before Christ had come back out of the Holy of Holies in A.D. 70, and if our atonement is not fully accomplished until he comes back out, why does Hebrews speak of our atonement in the past tense as something already fully accomplished (e.g. 1:3; 7:27; 9:12; 9:28; 10:10–14; 10:19–20; cf. 12:2)? Why does Hebrews indicate that the way into the Holy place has already been opened (cf. 10:19–20) and that we should now boldly draw near to the throne (cf. 4:16)? The author of Hebrews should not have been able to say these things prior to A.D. 70 if Stevens' view were correct. If we assume that all of the books of the New Testament were written prior to A.D. 70, it is significant to note that none of them teach that Christ's atoning work is something that is still in the process of being accomplished or something that is yet to be accomplished. The New Testament speaks of the atoning work of Christ as something fully accomplished (e.g. Rom. 3:24–25; 5:1–2; 5:9–11; 6:10; 2 Cor. 5:18; Gal. 1:4; 3:13; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:20, 22; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18–19; 2:24; 3:18; Rev. 1:5).¹¹⁷

Stevens' explanation of the ascension in light of the Book of Hebrews also causes confusion regarding the two phases of Christ's work that are outlined in Hebrews: his once-for-all sacrifice and his present session at the right hand of God.¹¹⁸ In its opening paragraph, the Book of Hebrews makes this distinction: "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:3). From the point of view of the author of Hebrews, Christ's seating at the right hand of God is a past event, and before he sat down at the right hand of God, he had already made purification for sins. The author of Hebrews makes this same point elsewhere, saying, "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet" (10:12–13). So from the perspective of the author of Hebrews, writing before A.D. 70, Christ is presently seated at the right hand of God (8:1), meaning that the work of atonement that

¹¹⁷ The biblical doctrine of Christ's once for all completion of the work of atonement at the cross stands opposed to all who teach otherwise, whether the Roman Catholic church (with its doctrines of penance and purgatory) or the Seventh Day Adventist church (with its doctrine of Investigative Judgment) or any Hyper-Preterists who teach that the atonement was not completed until A.D. 70.

¹¹⁸ See Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 479.

had to occur before he could be seated is finished (cf. John 19:30). In Stevens chronology, there is no time for Christ to be seated at the right hand of God (and await the defeat of his enemies) after accomplishing atonement because according to Stevens chronology, when Jesus finishes the atonement in the heavenly Holy of Holies (in A.D. 70), the Second Coming occurs.

Another assertion that Stevens makes repeatedly is that Christ's ascension as well as his supposed A.D. 70 return were "theophanies." He describes such theophanies as instances "when the clouds were rolled back like a scroll to open a window into the spiritual realm so that those to whom God wished to reveal Himself would be able to see this Theophany." He asserts that the two men say, "Christ's descent FROM heaven will be a theophany 'just like' his GOING INTO heaven (a 'cloud coming' theophany)." There are a number of problems with understanding the ascension of Christ (and his coming again) as a theophany. First, it must be noted that the two men do *not* say that Christ's descent from heaven will be a theophany. All that they say is that he will come in the same way or manner that the apostles saw him go into heaven. If the ascension were a theophany, that fact would have to be demonstrated on the basis of other evidence. It is not something that is asserted as a fact in the words of the two men in white.

Before we can determine whether the ascension was a theophany, however, we have to know the meaning of the term "theophany." The word itself is a theological term used to refer to "a visible appearance of God, generally in human form."¹¹⁹ Several examples of such theophanies are found in the Old Testament. The three men that appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18 are considered by many to be a theophany. God also appeared to Jacob in Genesis 28:10–17. The burning bush that Moses saw is usually described as a theophany (cf. Ex. 3:2–6). A number of commentators believe that many appearances of "the angel of the Lord" were theophanies (e.g., Ex. 23:20–23; 32:34).

The literary form of biblical theophanies varies, but some scholars have noted regularly recurring features. J.K. Kuntz, for example, outlines the following regular features of theophanies using Genesis 26:23–25 as an example.

It includes an introductory description (Yahweh appeared), divine self-asseveration ("I am the God of Abraham your father"), quelling of human fear

¹¹⁹ Arthur B. Fowler, "Theophany," *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, Pictorial Edition, eds. J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 1008.

(“fear not”), assertion of gracious divine presence (“I am with you”), *hieros logos* (“holy word”; “I will bless you”), and concluding description (he built an altar there).¹²⁰

Based on what Luke describes in the first chapter of Acts, the ascension of Christ cannot accurately be described as a “theophany.” If anything in the account of Acts 1:9–11 is a “theophany,” it is the appearance of the glory cloud, if indeed that is what the cloud is. The appearance of Jesus himself, however, is not represented as a theophany. It is represented in the same way the events of his entire life are represented. He is already on the Mount of Olives talking with the apostles. He does not suddenly appear to them in the glory cloud with a message. The heavens are not opened to reveal something previously invisible to the apostles.¹²¹ Jesus himself is not said to have undergone any change between the time he was talking to them in verses 4–8 and the point in time at which he was lifted up in verse 9. If this appearance of Christ were a “theophany,” every post-resurrection appearance of Christ would have to be defined as such. In fact, the entire life of Christ would have to be defined as such, at which point there is no longer anything distinctive about the incarnation.

Another important element of Stevens’ interpretation is his argument that the two men in white “did NOT say, ‘Jesus will come back down to earth and plant his feet on terra firma again.’” Stevens argues on the basis of 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 that the *terminus ad quem* of Jesus’ descent is not the earth, but the air – “the open space between earth and heaven where the normally unseen angels and God make their visible theophanic appearance on special redemptive occasions.” Stevens explains further what he means:

I understand Christ’s “parousia” in the sense of a temporary visit of the Royal Divine Emperor to His outlying territories, where he would make the circuit and pass through His subject cities and then return to His capital city. On his way through all these territorial cities and regions, many people joined his caravan to travel with him and eventually go back with him to his royal capital. An emperor or dignitary who engaged in a “visitation” of His subject territories did not stay in those territories very long. It was only a temporary visit for diplomatic or tribute-gathering purposes (and sometimes for discipline, conquering or subjugation

¹²⁰ Cited in Walter Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 1087.

¹²¹ In other words, the ascension is not presented in the same way that Stephen’s vision is presented (cf. Acts 7:55–56).

purposes). In Jesus' case at AD 66-70, it was twofold: to reward His persecuted saints and relieve them from the great tribulation, as well as judge the Jews throughout the whole Roman empire for their rejection of Jesus and the persecution of His Church. This was a three and a half year process of "visitation" or "parousia" (AD 66-70). It began with His literal "visible" and "bodily" descent from heaven (1 Thess. 4:15-17) in AD 66 to resurrect, change, and "snatch away" His saints and begin the pouring out of the plagues and wrath upon their Jewish persecutors for three and a half years (AD 66-70).¹²²

There are a number of problems involved with understanding 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 in the way that Stevens has explained it. These problems will become clear as we proceed. In verse 16 of this text, Paul says that "the Lord himself will descend from heaven." The word translated "will descend" is the Greek word *katabēsetai*, the future indicative of *katabainō*. The usual meaning of this word is "to move downward."¹²³ So, according to Paul, Jesus will descend from heaven. As it stands, the text seems to be a clear description of the fulfillment of the promise made by the two men in white in Acts 1:11. It should also be noted briefly that the text in 1 Thessalonians 4 undermines the arguments of those hyper-preterists who say that Christ's ascension was simply an elevation in dignity or honor. If it was, what is the descent described in 1 Thessalonians 4? The stripping of his dignity and honor?

In verse 17, Paul says, "Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord." Does this mean that Jesus' return is only into the air rather than to the earth? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to examine the previous verses. Jesus' coming is described in verse 15 as his *parousia*. This Greek term is normally used to refer to either "the state of being present at a place," or to "arrival as the first stage in presence."¹²⁴ The context rules out the possibility that Paul is using the term in the first sense. He is using the term in the sense of "arrival," or "coming." In this sense, the term *parousia* was often used as a technical term to describe "the coming of a hidden divinity, who makes his presence felt by a revelation of his power" or "the visit of a person of high rank, [especially] of kings and emperors visiting a province." These two ways in which

¹²² Edward Stevens, personal email to me dated April 7, 2004.

¹²³ See BDAG, s.v. καταβαίνω, 1,a (p. 514).

¹²⁴ See BDAG, s.v. παρουσία, (p. 780–81).

the term is used in a technical sense “can approach each other closely in [meaning], can shade off into one another, or even coincide.”¹²⁵ In other words, since kings and emperors were often considered to be divine, these two senses of the term could often overlap.

At the end of verse 16, Paul tells us that when Christ descends from heaven, “the dead in Christ will rise first.” In verse 17, Paul continues, “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds...” The word translated “caught up” is a form of the verb *harpazō*. This verb generally means “to snatch” or “to seize.” In this context, it means, “to grab or seize suddenly so as to remove or gain control.”¹²⁶ This event is commonly referred to as the “rapture.” The resurrected dead and those who are alive are caught up together “in the clouds,” and the purpose of their being “caught up” is “to meet the Lord in the air.” The word translated “to meet” is a form of the Greek word *apantēsis*. This word was the “ancient expression for the civic welcome of an important visitor or the triumphal entry of a new ruler into the capital city...”¹²⁷ The custom involved sending “a delegation outside the city to receive a dignitary who was on the way to town.”¹²⁸ Numerous ancient authors describe “how not only certain officials but also all the population would file out of the city to meet the emperor in his *parousia*.”¹²⁹

According to Paul, the place where those who have been “caught up” meet the Lord is “in the air.” Stevens makes much of the meaning of the Greek word for “air,” saying that it is, “the open space between earth and heaven where the normally unseen angels and God make their visible theophanic appearance on special redemptive occasions.” According to the standard Greek lexicon, the Greek term *aēr* can simply mean “the atmosphere immediately above the earth’s surface,” or “the space above the earth.” When used in this second sense, it can refer to the “locale of celestial bodies or phenomena,” or it can refer to “the political domain of transcendent beings or powers.”¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Ibid., 781.

¹²⁶ See BDAG, s.v. ἄρπάζω, 2,b (p. 134).

¹²⁷ Wilhelm Mundle, “*katantaō*,” *NIDNTT*, I:325.

¹²⁸ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 226.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 227.

¹³⁰ See BDAG, s.v. ἀήρ, 2 (p. 23).

The editors of the BDAG lexicon categorize the use of *aēr* in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 under the first main definition – “the atmosphere immediately above the earth’s surface.”

Whether one agrees with the BDAG interpretation of the way *aēr* is used in this verse or Ed Stevens’ interpretation, however, does not matter greatly because Paul does not say that the *aēr* or the “spiritual realm” is where Christ’s people stay (whether forever or for three and a half years) after meeting the Lord. Paul says at the end of verse 17 that “we will always be with the Lord,” but he does not say we will always be in the *aēr*. In fact, he does not say anything at all in these verses about where we will always be.¹³¹

The imagery that Paul uses in this passage does, however, provide us with clues regarding the final destination of those who were caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Paul uses the image of the coming (*parousia*) of an important dignitary to a city and the image of a delegation from that city going out to meet (*apantēsis*) this dignitary. In terms of this imagery, the *aēr* is the place where the delegation meets the dignitary on the road to the city. The important point to note is that the “customary procedure was for the delegation to return to the city with the visiting dignitaries...”¹³² The people did not meet the visiting dignitary on the road leading to the city and stop there. They met the visiting dignitary and accompanied him back to the city.¹³³ Likewise, those who have been caught up to meet the Lord in the air do not remain there. They accompany the Lord back to “the city,” which in terms of the Second Coming would be the earth.

Stevens argues that Christ’s “parousia” was temporary and that after three and a half years, he returned from the *aēr* to heaven (“his royal capital”) with his people. While the term “parousia” may have been used to describe such temporary royal visits in ancient literature, it is unlikely that it is being used in this sense in the case of Christ’s “parousia.” Scripture presents the consummation of all things in terms of heaven coming to earth and the two becoming one (cf. Rev. 21–22; Eph. 1:10). The New Jerusalem descends out of heaven (Rev. 21:2, 10), and God tabernacles with man. The apostle John describes it in these words: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their

¹³¹ Green, op. cit., 228.

¹³² Ibid., 226.

¹³³ Stevens explanation of the “parousia” would seem to require that the people went out to meet the king, stayed outside their city for three and a half years and then returned with the king to his capital. The king, in this case, would never actually visit the city from which the people came.

God” (Rev. 21:3; cf. 21:22; 22:3; cf. Lev. 26:11–12; Ezek. 37:27). The meek will inherit the earth (cf. Matt. 5:5).¹³⁴ In other words, Christ does not return to his royal capital in heaven because his royal capital and his throne are presented in Scripture as having come to earth, his inheritance (cf. Gal. 3:16).

Stevens also attempts to prove that Acts 1:11 was fulfilled in the first century by pointing to a passage in Josephus that says the Jews saw chariots and troops of soldiers in the clouds in A.D. 66. He says that if this phenomenon was the fulfillment of Revelation 1:7, then it was also the fulfillment of Acts 1:11. A few observations are in order. First, the writings of Josephus are not inspired Scripture. We cannot automatically assume that his account of such a vision is true. Second, Stevens himself says that the coming of Christ would only be “seen” by those whose spiritual eyes were opened.¹³⁵ If those Stevens refers to as “sleepers” (those who were not true Christians) did not see Jesus, how could unbelieving Jews “see” him? Third, even if we assume that Josephus’ account is accurate, it does not say that the Jews saw Jesus. The account says that they saw chariots and troops. What Josephus describes is much more similar in nature to that which Elisha’s servant saw (2 Kings 6:17). Josephus does not describe anyone seeing a visible and bodily return of Jesus into the air or anywhere else.¹³⁶

John Noē

John Noē argues for a hyper-preterist interpretation of Acts 1:9–11 based on a faulty understanding of the meaning of the Greek word *erchomai*. As noted above, Noē seems to assert that the term means “comes and goes.” He clearly asserts that the word *erchomai* refers to the “general, overall manner in which all his [Christ’s] many visible

¹³⁴ Unlike the message of many pagan religions, the message of Scripture is “earthy.” As David Holwerda explains, “At its center lies a concern about land, about the earth. From creation to consummation the question is: Who possesses the earth, how can it be possessed, and when?” (*Jesus & Israel*, p. 85). God created the physical earth, and His creation is good (Gen. 1–2). The Abrahamic covenant included a promise of land (cf. Gen. 12:1; 15:18; 17:8), and the land became a central theme of biblical faith. In fact the Hebrew word אֶרֶץ (*’eres*), translated “land,” occurs over 2,500 times in the Old Testament. The New Testament does not nullify this promised inheritance of land. Instead, it broadens the promise to include the entire earth (cf. Matt. 5:5; Rom. 4:13) rather than Israel alone. It also clearly specifies that Jesus Christ is the true heir of the promise (Gal. 3:16) and that all who belong to Christ are co-heirs (Gal. 3:29). To permanently remove Christ and His people from the renewed earth is to deny them their inheritance.

¹³⁵ Edward E. Stevens, *Expectations Demand a First Century Rapture*, 52.

¹³⁶ Stevens argues that the A.D. 70 Second Coming was to be a visible and bodily Second Coming. If this is the case, then what is described by Josephus cannot be claimed as a description of a vision of the Second Coming since Josephus does not mention anyone seeing Jesus.

comings have occurred.” Both of these assertions are simply false. The word *erchomai* usually means “to come,” and it sometimes means “to go.” It does not mean “comes and goes.” The truth of this can be easily demonstrated by simply translating the verb *erchomai* as “comes and goes” in the places where it is used in the New Testament. The result is nonsensical. Nor is the word *erchomai* used adverbially here to describe the manner in which Jesus’ many comings have occurred. It is a *verb* that means “to come.”

Timothy James

Timothy James’ argument against the traditional interpretation of Acts 1:9–11 is based on his understanding of the words “in the same way.” He rejects the idea of a physical second advent because Jesus will come “in the same way” that he went, namely, “in a cloud.” However, as we have seen, even if Christ ascended with or “in” the cloud, this did not immediately render him invisible during the entirety of his ascension. The entire passage repeatedly stresses the visibility of the ascension, and the two men in white explicitly say that the apostles “saw him go into heaven.”

Others

Insofar as Kenneth Davies adopts Randall Otto’s interpretation, the same objections that apply to Otto’s interpretation apply to his as well. Unfortunately, Davies’ abbreviated quotes from Otto’s work result in an assertion that is not only contrary to what Otto says but is also demonstrably false. In his discussion of the Greek word *epairō*, Otto claims that in the active voice, this word refers to physical lifting but that in the passive voice it has the figurative meaning “to exalt.” While Otto’s claim regarding the meaning of this word in the passive voice is itself seriously problematic, Davies’ incomplete quotation of his argument results in something that is completely false. In his quotation of Otto’s argument, Davies fails to mention the fact that Otto says the active form of the verb “does describe the physical action of lifting up an object.” Instead, Davies summarizes Otto’s argument by quoting only what he says about the *passive* form of the word. Davies writes, “This word ‘does not have to do with an active *physical* lifting up but with a lifting up of someone in stature or divinity” (p. 253). The “use of this word does *not* denote a literal and physical elevation of the person, but rather

describes in figurative terms the elevation of the person in honor and dignity, i.e., exaltation” (ibid).” Obviously, Davies’ quotation of Otto’s statement would give one the false impression that Otto says the Greek word *epairō* never refers to the physical lifting up of something. Otto does not say this.¹³⁷

William H. Bell, Jr. asserts that other biblical references to the *parousia* indicate that it would definitely occur within the first century. He then says that since Acts 1:11 refers to the same event to which these other passages refer, the coming of Christ predicted in Acts 1:11 *must* have been fulfilled in the first century as well. Unfortunately, Bell’s brief paper does not offer any exegesis of Acts 1:9–11 to substantiate his assertion. Bell simply assumes the truth of hyper-preterism and begs the very question that is being debated. Here is a summary of Bell’s argument:

1. Other biblical references to the *parousia* indicate that it would definitely occur within the first century.
2. Acts 1:11 refers to the same event to which these other passages refer.
3. Therefore, the coming of Christ predicted in Acts 1:11 *must* have been fulfilled in the first century as well.

The problem with this argument is that only those who are already convinced of the truth of his two premises (i.e. other hyper-preterists) will accept the conclusion of his argument. Those who are not hyper-preterists, however, do not believe his first premise is true. And the truth of the second premise is something that should be exegetically demonstrated (not assumed at the outset) in a paper claiming to explain the meaning of Acts 1:11.¹³⁸

A Three-Tiered Universe?

As we have proceeded through this study of Acts 1:9–11, we have noted in passing some common hyper-preterist objections to the traditional interpretation of this

¹³⁷ See http://www.kendavies.addr.com/articles/how_was.htm.

¹³⁸ If, for example, the predictions of an imminent “coming of the Son of Man with the clouds” has to do with events related to Christ’s ascension to the Father to receive his kingdom (cf. Dan. 7:13–14) rather than to his Second Coming, then some of these passages may be referring to one thing while others refer to something else.

passage. It may prove helpful at this point to respond briefly to an objection that is raised, not by hyper-preterists, but by skeptics. Liberals and skeptics repeatedly claim that the traditional interpretation of Acts 1:9–11 necessitates the adoption of a false three-tiered understanding of the universe as well as the idea that heaven is located at some physical point somewhere in space. This objection is frequently raised in the writings of men such as Rudolf Bultmann and John Shelby Spong. But does a traditional interpretation of Acts 1:9–11 require us to believe that heaven is located somewhere in the sky above the clouds? The answer is no.

As Bruce Metzger explains, “the ascension, properly understood, has no more to do with Ptolemaic astronomy than does the incarnation.”¹³⁹ Jesus did not have to physically ascend into the sky in order to enter the heavenly sphere of existence.

...though Jesus did not need to ascend in order to return to that sphere which we call heaven, yet in fact he did ascend a certain distance into the sky, until a cloud took him out of sight. By such a miraculous sign he impressed upon his followers the conviction that this was now the last time he would appear to them, and that henceforth they should not expect another manifestation, but should realize that the transitional period had ended.¹⁴⁰

Metzger concludes, “At Jesus’ final appearance to his followers he rose from their midst, not because he had to do so in order to go to the Father, but for didactic reasons, in order to make his last act symbolically intelligible.”¹⁴¹ In other words, Jesus could have “ascended” to the right hand of the Father without moving at all. He could have simply vanished and immediately entered into the heavenly sphere of existence. But he didn’t. He chose instead to do something that would dramatically symbolize the end of the transitional period to his apostles. His visible physical ascension symbolized other truths as well. It clearly demonstrated to the apostles that Jesus was going back to where he was before (cf. John 6:62). It also visibly indicated that he was going to receive his kingdom (cf. Dan. 7:13–14). The fact that the action was symbolic, however, does not mean that it was not real.¹⁴² According to Scripture, Jesus was lifted up a certain distance

¹³⁹ Bruce M. Metzger, “The Ascension of Jesus Christ,” 84.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁴² Another example of a real but symbolic action may be seen in Mark 7:33. A man suffering from deafness and a speech impediment is brought to Jesus for healing. Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears and after spitting touched the man’s tongue. The man was healed. It was not necessary for Jesus to do

before he entered the heavenly sphere of existence. We are not told how far Jesus was lifted up, only that he was. This does not mean that “heaven,” as the dwelling place of God, is located somewhere above the surface of the earth.

Conclusion

The hyper-preterist rejection of the traditional interpretation of Acts 1:9–11 has not led to anything even remotely approaching agreement on an alternative interpretation of these three verses. In fact, the wide range of conflicting, and often contradictory, attempts of hyper-preterists to explain this text in terms of their theology gives the reader the impression of an almost desperate *ad hoc* type of exegesis, a grasping at straws in order to find something, anything, to offer as an alternative reading. The clarity of what Luke tells us in Acts 1:9–11 is probably the reason why this text is either ignored or else passed over with relatively little detailed discussion in most hyper-preterist literature.

A careful examination of the text of Acts 1:9–11 reveals that the traditional interpretation of this text is the correct interpretation. According to Luke, the lifting up of Jesus was an objectively visible event witnessed by the apostles. They saw Jesus taken up with their own eyes. According to the two men in white, Jesus would come back to earth in the same manner that the apostles saw him go. Whether he was lifted up with the cloud or was lifted up to a cloud, the manner of his going was visible and bodily. The manner of his second coming to earth, therefore, will likewise be visible and bodily. At his second coming all of those who have died in Christ will be resurrected. God will give life to their mortal bodies (Rom. 8:11). The bodies of the redeemed who are still alive at that time will be changed (1 Cor. 15:51). The present heavens and earth will be transformed and freed from the curse of sin (Rom. 8:19–22), and the dwelling place of God will be with man (Rev. 21:3; 22:3). All of his people will be with him forever in a restored creation.¹⁴³

these things in order to heal the man. He could have simply willed the man to be healed, but he did these other things as well as symbolic acts.

¹⁴³ For a good detailed discussion of the biblical doctrine of the new heavens and new earth, see Cornelis Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 454–88; cf. also Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 274–87.

